UNDERGROUND HOMOSEXUALITIES: RESITUATING THE EARLY SIXTIES CINEMA OF KENNETH ANGER, JACK SMITH, AND ANDY WARHOL

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In an era when gay activism finds itself championing wedding chapels and combat training camps as the promised lands for an increasingly homogenous gay and lesbian community, the American underground's images of outlaw homosexual worlds are a welcome tonic. In the early sixties, these films raised queer consciousness and encouraged gay people to radically re-imagine how they could live their lives. These films continue to bear such consciousness-raising potential. As this study shows, in 1963, Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol each challenged authoritative (and oppressive) interpretations of homosexuality with avant-garde reconfigurations of queerness. And, each artist's vision of homosexual possibility vastly differed from those of his fellow filmmakers. This cinema, and the time it documents, imagined homosexuality as something new. For the avant-garde queers of the early sixties, homosexuality's refusal of sexual norms promised a radical reevaluation of sexual

selfhood and a rethinking of sexual economies. Gay culture in the twenty-first century would do well to remember this promise.

Anger's *Scorpio Rising* presents homosexuality as an ongoing negotiation between the queer subject and the dominant culture's demands for normalization, an understanding whose usefulness is as timely now as ever. Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, with its fetishistic worship of the dead B-film goddess Maria Montez, imaginatively re-conceives queer sexuality and queer bodies as anti-phallic. These new queer bodies interact through new sexual economies, which Smith constructs from harem imagery culled from old Hollywood films. Warhol's 1963 queer films *Kiss* and *Haircut (No. 1)* extol ordinariness, but in the process they sabotage sexual certainty. *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)* both imagine what sexual identity and sexual attraction might look like without the demand for fixed sexualities.

These four films from 1963 inaugurated avant-garde expressions of homosexuality in order to resist the normalizing impulses of the dominant culture. Their experimental approaches to desire, gendered identity, power relations, and representability do more than foreshadow queer theory's current challenges to linear narratives of desire and coherent models of sexuality. They have much to contribute to it.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality and Avant-garde-ism

This dissertation reclaims the early sixties films of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol as avant-garde documents intent on inaugurating new understandings of homosexuality. Each of these cinematic experiments in queer culture re-stages same-sex desire as an opportunity for radically reevaluating what it means to be a gendered person and a sexual subject. In true sixties style, these 1963 underground films, Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, and Warhol's *Kiss* and *Haircut (No. 1)*, express utopic beliefs in homosexuality's potential as a liberating social force. These films capture a revolutionary moment in queer history that was brief and, in some ways, has been forgotten. Nayland Blake, a gay artist and curator who came of age in New York in the sixties, attests to its loss. Describing the rise of commercial gay culture in the West Village in the seventies, he writes, "I was desperately looking for something that corresponded to my interior emotional experience. But there was something mismatched, a discrepancy between the bourgeois consumerism of the emerging gay market and the iconoclastic aestheticism I valued" (170). He explains that, during the same period, "the art world began to distance itself from queer content and identity, moving from a garrulous, ambisexual representation toward an increasingly formalist abstraction. As the avant-garde art scene began to repress its queerness, the gay scene began to repress its avant-garde-ness" (182). Blake concludes by identifying a kind of queer cultural

amnesia: "As we look around, it is clear that we have given so much up that we have forgotten that we even had the right to ask for things that previous generations demanded without qualm, like the utter transformation of the conditions of our existence" (183).

Michael Warner's recent popular nonfiction book *The Trouble with Normal* suggests that "since the most painfully instructed generation [of queers] has been decimated by death, the queer culture of the present faces more than the usual shortfall in memory" (52). Although AIDS quite likely has contributed to the dismal state of queer cultural memory, gay culture's initial turning away from avant-garde ideals more directly corresponds to its embrace of essentialist notions of gayness and lesbianism. Warner traces this essentialist impulse back to the dominant culture's persistent moralism: "Because moralism so often targets not just sex but knowledge about sex, people come to believe, nonsensically, that moral or legitimate sex must be unlearned, prereflective, present before history, isolated from the public circulation of culture" (9). The homosexual community's embrace of such essentialist beliefs erodes its generative distance from the dominant culture and forecloses the future production of new sexualities. By adopting essentialist attitudes, the gay movement abandons what is arguably its raison d'être.

In many ways, my dissertation's celebration of Anger's, Smith's, and Warhol's depictions of homosexuality as an avant-garde force is in sympathy with Warner's book. Warner laments the gay movement's recent assumption of an essentialist and assimilationist stance. Instead, he advocates that it change course and resolutely oppose the status quo. He argues that homosexuality is literally the avant-garde, i.e., the front line, of a more encompassing, emergent awareness of man's ability to remake himself

and the world anew. He writes, "[s]ex does not need to be primordial in order to be legitimate. Civilization doesn't just repress our original sexuality; it makes new kinds of sexuality. And new sexualities, including learned ones, might have as much validity as ancient ones, if not more" (11). Homosexuality may be just the first of many alternative sexualities yet to be developed. Warner claims that homosexuality once actively aspired to such vanguard-ism, and it should do so again. He explains that queer culture, at its best, not only promotes alternative sexual practices, but it also proposes a new sexual ethic, "that one doesn't pretend to be *above* the indignity of sex. Sex is understood to be as various as the people who have it. It is not required to be tidy, normal, uniform, or authorized by the government" (35). For Warner, queer culture is thus by its very definition avant-garde: "there is no truck with bourgeois propriety" (36).

The current gay movement, however, falls far short of Warner's ideal. In its current incarnation, it hardly leads the fight against pious moralism to make way for new modes of sexual being. Instead, "[f]ailing to recognize that there is a politics of sexual shame . . . it reduces the gay movement to a desexualized identity politics" (Warner 24). Warner points out that it refuses to consider "the perspective of those at the bottom of the scale of respectability: queers, sluts, prostitutes, trannies, club crawlers, and other lowlifes" (ix). Because the gay movement at present fights gay stigma without properly addressing sexual shame, it fails "to escape the ambivalence of shame. Dignity on these terms is bound to remain inauthentic" (Warner 33).

Warner charges that the present-day gay movement claims to celebrate diversity, but in practice it champions just a few deviations from heteronormative sexuality: gayness, lesbianism, bisexualtiy, and, on a good day, transexuality. Even these, it often

seems intent on normalizing beyond recognition. Where the gay rights movement once called for a relaxation of the dominant culture's sexual mores, current leaders like Larry Kramer exclaim that "the only way that gays can assume our political responsibility . . . [is] to be studied, to be written about, not as cocks and cunts, but as *gays*" (qtd. in Warner 33). Warner rightly acknowledges that there is "a real and consequential difference. But being lesbian and gay involves both stigma and shame . . . [Kramer] wants us to be more ashamed about sex, to see cocks and cunts as meriting even more scorn than we already have for them" (33). Meanwhile, Andrew Sullivan could in 1993 with near immunity proclaim that most gay people "not only accept the natural origin of their sexual orientation, but wish to be integrated into society as it is . . . a 'queer' identity is precisely what they want to avoid" (qtd. in Warner 52-52).

The gay movement's early rejection of sexual norms can now only be found in its recent and smaller offshoot, the queer movement. In *Saint Foucault*, David Halperin states, "'queer' does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (63). While the more rarified queer movement has maintained an avant-garde approach to emerging sexualities, the much more vast and popular gay movement lumbers inexorably towards normality. As Warner explains, "normal" here does not mean "everyday" or "ordinary," designations that still hold revolutionary potential. Instead, "normal" here means "certified, approved, as meeting a set of normative standard" (Warner 56). Once set in motion, a group's drive towards normalization is difficult to stop. It perpetuates itself: "what most people do or desire is, according to the new science, what people should do

and desire" (Warner 57). This embrace of normal gay and lesbian identities has turned the gay movement into a shadow movement. Its leaders are professional actors and media pundits, and their increasingly reactionary version of gayness unquestioningly bolsters such stolid, generally oppressive institutions as marriage, the nuclear family, and the military. As Warner concludes, to the "national audience of the United States, it may seem that the gay movement is more visible and powerful than ever. To queers on the ground, this monumental appearance feels as fake as the marbleized façades of the 1990s corporate architecture" (79).

The schism between queer factions and the larger gay movement in the nineties is not merely a cause of concern for queer activists and gay leaders. It signals a powerful closing off of queer consciousness and its sense of queer history. As David Halperin writes, "[g]ay liberation has produced not only an inestimable array of gay liberties and permissions . . . but also a surprising number of new constraints" ("Closet" 26). The gay movement blandly trumpets gay pride, while denying the darker aspects of sexual identity, which queers share with their non-queer counterparts. It systematically ignores broader cultural issues of gender and sexuality, such as the dominant culture's increasingly draconian gender constraints and the continued generation of sexual shame (think Bill Clinton or, for that matter, George Michaels). These larger cultural concerns have significant effects on gay culture and queer identities, but the gay movement's uncritical embrace of cultural norms ensures that such "dimensions of gay subjectivity are now off-limits to gay investigation and thus unavailable to us for systematic reflection and understanding. For all its benefits, gay pride has made it impossible for us to inquire into ourselves" (Halperin "Closet" 26). The gay movement's normalizing turn towards

clearly defined sexual identities similarly impacts queer consciousness in a negative way. Cindy Patton's analysis of fixed identity models suggests that the new-normal gay identity both " elides its construction [and] implies or renarrates [queer] history" (162). The filtering out of avant-garde concerns from the gay movement has not only foreclosed homosexuality's revolutionary potential. It also has rendered gayness as a kind of false consciousness, incapable of self-analysis and ignorant of its own origins.

Queer Historiography

The antidote to such false consciousness is a reaffirmation of queer history. In the seventies, Michel Foucault developed a method of historiography whose aim was to salvage the origins of gay sexuality from the distortions of traditional history. According to Foucault, traditional history's grand narratives misleadingly presented homosexuality as a singular, formerly repressed perversity. Foucault pioneered what he called "effective history" to show that homosexuality was not a recently unrepressed urge, but an altogether new invention, a new sexual technology. Elements of Foucault's effective history can help recover the avant-garde homosexualities of sixties underground film.

Foucault's effective history situates objects of inquiry in their relative historical moments to define everything, even and especially bodies and the discourses that surround them, as culturally constructed. He writes, "'effective' history differs from traditional history in being without constants. Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficient to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (*Language* 153). Foucault's effective history thus clarifies the estrangement between past concepts and similarly designated concepts in the present. Perversion in the eighteenth century is not the same thing as perversion in the twentieth century. Foucault

argued that the awareness of such conceptual slippages demanded new historical methods: "The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. Necessarily, we must dismiss those tendencies that encourage the consoling play of recognitions" (*Language* 153).

Foucault's critical insight destabilized much traditional history, which had often assigned transhistorical certainty to dynamic concepts. Under Foucault's method, history became much more inscrutable—in particular because it could hide alien understandings of the world under seemingly familiar concepts, or familiar understandings of the world under seemingly alien concepts. Foucault suggested that this was especially true in regard to subjects like sexuality, which generated a multitude of discourses, and was in turn shaped by these discourses. For Foucault, the effective historian's task is to sift through these many discourses to find the "patient and continuous development" of the current object of inquiry. Jeffrey Weeks explains that Foucault's history is thus "aimed at constructing a 'genealogy,' the locating of the 'traces' of the present [in the past]: it is basically a 'history of the present'"(*Against* 27).

Foucault's history of the present sought new connections with the past, which opened the way for his notion of reverse-discourses. Reverse-discourses occur when oppressed individuals take charge of the language and concepts of their oppressors and turn this language to their advantage. Reverse-discourses are rarely recorded, but they can be inferred. By theorizing the existence of such un- or barely recorded discourses, Foucault's effective history could site traces of current objects of inquiry in their seeming opposites. This proved especially useful to homosexual history, whose origins Foucault

persuasively claimed to find in those very authoritative institutions that most virulently denounced it:

> There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and "psychic hermaphrodism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity": but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse; homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (*History* 101)

Foucault's theories of effective history and reverse discourses allowed him to connect modern homosexuality to those non-normative, but not exactly homosexual, sexualities that preceded it. Foucault's effective history thus presented modern homosexuality as a sexual innovation, whose raw components lay in the recent past. Homosexuality was not a transhistorical desire, but a recent production of "of our bodies—with their elements, their surfaces, their masses, their thicknesses, a non-disciplinary eroticism, an eroticism of the body in a volatile and diffuse state, with its chance encounters and its uncalculated pleasures" (qtd. in Halperin "Closet" 43).

Foucault's assertion that one cannot uncritically read the category of homosexuality backwards in time has proved incredibly valuable to queer historiography. This is especially so since an American literary critic, who was at the time unaware of Foucault's work, almost simultaneously arrived at the same conclusion. In 1975 Caroll Smith-Rosenberg's essay "The Female World of Love and Ritual" argued that the intense love which nineteenth century middle-class women expressed for each other in their diaries was not homosexual love because female homosexuality as we understand it had not yet come into being. Both Foucault and Smith-Rosenberg refused homosexuality's

transhistorical status and instead regarded it as just one of the more recent products of human sexuality's dynamic, unpredictable, and ongoing development.

As valuable as Foucault's effective history has proven to be to the avant-garde view of homosexuality, it does have blind spots. The very privileging of the present that enables Foucault to connect modern homosexuality to previous, radically different understandings of sexuality rests on a flawed assumption, that there is ever just one understanding of homosexuality at a given time. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick reveals how this assumption generates an overly linear idea of homosexual history. She explains that in "Foucault's account, the unidirectional emergence in the late nineteenth century of 'the homosexual' as 'a species' . . .is seen as tied to an also unidirectional, and continuing, emergent understanding of homosexuality in terms of gender inversion and gender transitivity" (*Epistemology* 46). For Foucault, this "understanding appears . . . to underlie and constitute the common sense of the homosexuality 'we know today'" (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 46). Sedgwick points out that Foucault's history assumes a narrative of supersession: in his "history one model of same-sex relations is superceded by another, which may again be superceded by another" (*Epistemology* 47). As one sexuality emerges in Foucault's history, it necessarily eclipses the former. Sedgwick, however, examines the discourses surrounding the United States Supreme Court's *Bower v. Hardwick* case to demonstrate how many divergent understandings of homosexuality currently coexist in the present, both in gay communities and in the dominant culture.[1] Foucault's effective history serves the avant-garde vision of homosexuality by seeing it as a work-in- progress, as something that

resists stable definition. Nevertheless, there is no single understanding of homosexuality "we know today," and, even if there were, its history would not be linear.

Homosexualities

Many poststructuralist thinkers have cast doubt upon the usefulness of identity categories and subject positions, especially those categories and positions constructed around gender and sexuality. Jacqueline Rose explains how Lacanian psychoanalysis posits the existence of sexual selfhood, while simultaneously questioning its validity:

> For Lacan, the unconscious undermines the subject from any position of certainty, from any relation of knowledge to his or her psychic processes and history, and simultaneously reveals the fictional nature of the sexual category to which every human subject is none the less assigned. In Lacan's account, sexual identity operates as a law—it is something enjoined on the subject. For him, the fact that individuals must line up according to an opposition (having or not having the phallus) makes that clear. But it is the constant difficulty, or even impossibility, of that process which Lacan emphasize[s]. (52)

As impossible as sexual identity categories may be, the affirmation of oppositional sexual identities is often politically necessary to prevent cultural ossification. Jeffrey Weeks suggests that we should therefore regard homosexual subject positions as propensities, products of "the whole series of social interactions, encounters with peers, educational processes, rituals of exclusion, labelling events, chance encounters, [and] political identifications . . . They are not pregiven in nature . . . they are social creations" (*Against* 44). Such homosexual propensities can effect social change, but they remain "provisional, ever precarious, dependent upon, and constantly challenged by, an unstable relation of unconscious forces, changing social; and personal meanings, and historical contingencies" (Weeks *Sexuality* 186).

This instability gives homosexual identifications inherent political value. Weeks, for instance, observes that the multiform possibilities of homosexual desire are "variously constructed . . . as an aspect of wider gender and sexual relation" (*Against* 15). Already homosexuality is implicated in broader and ongoing cultural contests. Similarly, Foucault explains that sexual liberation movements in general are never just about making space for a few new sexual practices. Instead, they are movements that "start with sexuality, with the apparatus of sexuality in the midst of which we're caught, and which make it function to the limit; but, at the same time, they are in motion relative to it, disengaging themselves and surmounting it" (qtd. in Weeks *Against* 36). Weeks' and Foucault's comments point to the way that homosexuality's location at the avant-garde of sexual development similarly sites it at the forefront of politics. As Weeks makes clear, "what has been historically constructed can be politically reconstructed" (*Sexuality* 210).

This mutual interplay between politics and history signals how difficult it is to avoid distortions when investigating queer history. The potential for distortion may be especially strong in a study such as this one, which focuses on counter-cultural texts from the sixties. The editors of *Imagine Nation* observe, "[c]ounter-cultural knowledge can't be accurately represented by a straight line, or even the squiggly line; a more evocative figure would be the matrix, or perhaps the concentric circle. Yet, by disciplinary convention, historical accounts are liner, chronological, and teleological"(Braunstein and Doyle 10). Any teleological retelling of queerness probably does some sort of violence to its history. Weeks similarly acknowledges this danger, but he proposes that a "way through can be found if we begin with the recognition of human diversity" (*Sexuality* 210).

My dissertation takes as its starting point the idea that queer culture is now and has since its inception been populated by a multiplicity of homosexualities. I am most interested in those early sixties homosexualities that Teresa de Lauretis would term queer, those that "may be understood and imagined as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture" ("Queer" iii). These synchronous homosexualities and their representations may differ, but all of them perform what De Lauretis defines as queer work, as I hope my dissertation does as well. They all "recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual" ("Queer" iv).

Chapter 2 of my dissertation explains how two seemingly unrelated cultural projects of the late twentieth century, the radical reassessment of homosexuality and the push to expand the realm of representability in language and art, come together in the work of Anger, Smith and Warhol. Homosexuality had reached a crisis point in the early sixties, with a multitude of voices arguing over its definition and narration. In the industrialized world, particularly the United States, legal, medical, psychological and social institutions were all beginning to reevaluate homosexuality's non-normative status. At the same time, the organs of mainstream popular culture, especially newspapers, magazines and Hollywood, were exploiting homosexual themes more than ever. During this volatile period, a new group of queer literati began producing some of the earliest, and most diverse, queer-authored discourses on homosexuality. Most notable among these were the New York School poet Frank O'Hara, the beat writers Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, and the hustler-turned-author John Rechy. O'Hara wrote poems that

prompted gay men to consider the virtual communities they had been building through their shared worship of fallen female stars. Allen Ginsberg repackaged homosexual acts as joyous forms of social protest. William Burroughs broke age-old censorship codes to depict queer desire as a cipher for the policing of sexuality and identity. John Rechy documented a superabundance of gay worlds, revealing the many different ways of being homosexual that raucously coexisted within. The pioneering queer work of these writers both corresponded to, and in some cases paved the way for the underground cinema's bold images of same-sex desire.

My final three chapters focus on how Anger, Smith and Warhol each experiment with formal aspects of the cinema in order to participate in the public contest over homosexual definition and present homosexuality as an avant-garde social practice. Chapter 3 examines how Kenneth Anger experiments with editing in *Scorpio Rising* to reconfigure queer visibility. His *Scorpio Rising* specifically revisits Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein's methods of montage, a theory and practice of editing which aims to grant cinematic form to abstract ideas. Anger draws on montage techniques to conflate images of homosexuality with what Eve Sedgwick has termed homosociality, or heterosexual same-sex bonding. In fact, Anger's montage often renders homosexuality as if it were interchangeable with homosociality. In addition, *Scorpio Rising* uses rapid editing and found footage from such Hollywood films as Laslo Benedek's *The Wild One* (1954) to subvert the way that mainstream culture has traditionally depicted male same-sex desire as a form of narcissism. Instead, *Scorpio Rising* creates a reverse-discourse, which appropriates images from popular culture to depict homosexuality as much more complicated than theories of inversion or narcissism could suggest.

Chapter 4 explores how Jack Smith innovates *mise-en-scene* techniques to recycle old Hollywood imagery in a newly queer context. In particular, he recasts the image of the forgotten B-movie goddess Maria Montez as a deeply ambivalent figure of homosexual agency. While Kenneth Anger's *Puce Moment* (1949) first introduced the forgotten movie queen as a stand-in for homosexuality, Jack Smith exaggerates this trope. His commitment to Montez in fact recalls the mid-twentieth century surrealist artist Joseph Cornell, who similarly expressed devotion to forgotten Hollywood starlets by enshrining their images in his artwork. Smith celebrates Montez's non-star status in several paeans that appeared in *Film Culture*, the literary organ of the underground film movement. Smith inaugurates what would later be called his "trash" aesthetic by exalting Montez's failure to achieve A-list visibility, and holding her forth as an icon of the refusal of the status quo in his 1963 film *Flaming Creatures*. Smith's film re-politicizes homosexual camp, which had otherwise become mainstream by the early sixties. Judith Butler's theories of queer morphology and the lesbian phallus show how the creatures in Smith's film reconfigure the queer body as explicitly non-phallic. Similarly, Teresa de Lauretis's theories of the lesbian fetish reveal how Smith's "trash' aesthetic appropriates the Hollywood harem imagery of Montez's films to propose new circuits of sexual desire to accommodate his creatures' new queer bodies. More than any other artist from the early sixties, Smith expressed homosexuality as will to avant-garde transformation.

Chapter 5 studies the way that Andy Warhol's early sixties cinema exaggerates the automatic aspects of filmmaking to interrogate and document homosexual ambiguity in everyday contexts. Two of Warhol's earliest films, *Kiss* (1963) and *Haircut #1* (1963), seem homoerotically to remake two nineteenth-century Edison shorts, *The May Irwin*

Kiss (1896) and *The Barber Shop* (1894). Warhol's return to the origins of cinema suggests how his "remakes" apparently reinvent film in a queer context. Moreover, while *The May Irwin Kiss* and *The Barber Shop* each capture their mundane subjects in less than a minute, Warhol's *Kiss* and *Haircut (No. 1)* extend these films' original situations for fifty minutes and thirty minutes respectively. Warhol's "remakes" thus not only locate confusion between the homosocial and the homoerotic in some of cinema's earliest images, but also relentlessly extend this confusion to the point of absurdity. *Kiss* challenges the relationship between representability and sexual resolution by isolating and exaggerating the most ordinary contact point of sexual attraction, the kiss. *Haircut (No. 1)* similarly unsettles coherent sexual identity by heightening, rather than resolving, the homoerotic imagery of its haircutting party. In both of these films, Warhol uses his radically uninterrupted camera work to show just how deceptively ordinary avant-garde sexuality can be.

Note

[1] The 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* case pitted Michael J. Bowers, Attorney General of Georgia, against Michael Hardwick, an Atlanta native who had been charged with sodomy for engaging in consensual sex with another man in his own home. The U.S. Supreme court upheld the Georgia sodomy conviction.

CHAPTER 2
ADVANCING NEW HOMOSEXUALITIES AT THE DAWN OF THE SIXTIES

The innovative, queer images of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963), Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and Andy Warhol's *Kiss* (1963) and *Haircut (No. 1)* (1963) appeared in New York at a time when arguments about homosexuality had reached a flash point. In the early 1960s, multitudes of voices were vying to take control of homosexuality's definition. Legal, medical, psychological and social institutions that in the past had only rarely found opportunities to pronounce judgements on homosexuality, were now confronting it everywhere, and their judgements of its various manifestations were far from consistent. Many members of these institutions began to re-evaluate homosexuality's non-normative status, while others began mounting unusually virulent opposition to homosexuality's nascent acceptance. At the same time, mainstream popular culture, from Hollywood to the *New York Times* best seller's list, was producing and disseminating more discourses on homosexuality than ever. Previous official explanations of homosexuality as being an illness or an error were straining to accommodate this new proliferation of homosexual imagery. As a result, new conceptual models of homosexuality suddenly had the opportunity to challenge these long-standing, and apparently outdated, paradigms. A host of queer artists and writers from the period seized this moment to redefine and re-narrate what it might mean to be homosexual.

The "Swish" Alps and Critical Mass Media

Homosexuality stopped being a topic of discussion only for artists, activists, and

authorities at the dawn of the sixties. Suddenly, mainstream depictions of homosexuality exploded. As John D'Emilio explains, "The reticence that activists of the 1950s characterized as a conspiracy of silence yielded to a fascination with this exotic, unexplored realm of American society. In pornography, literature, and the mass media, portrayals of gay life multiplied" (129). Some of this resulted from relaxed legal restrictions. The opening of the sixties, for instance, witnessed the Supreme Court clearing male physique magazines of obscenity charges in the *Manual Enterprises* case. Manual Enterprises, the largest producer of male pictorials, was selling 40,000 copies of its magazines per month in 1960 when the post office seized its publications. D'Emilio reports that the Supreme Court's decision "eliminated prohibitions against the publication and distribution of pictorials and by 1965 total monthly sales of physique magazines topped 750,000" (136). *The New York Times* corroborates this surge in "magazines and papers designed to appeal to inverted sexual tastes" ("Growth" 241). According to *The New York Times*, the winter of 1963 saw New York news stands awash in "so-called body-building publications presenting, under the guise of physical culture, photos of scantily-clad, heavily muscled men, and others peddling outright homosexual pornography in text and illustration" ("Growth 241).

In October 1961, the Production Code Administration (PCA) in Hollywood also relaxed its rules, but with much less salacious effects. It ruled that "homosexuality might be portrayed on the screen 'provided any references are treated with care, discretion and restraint'"(qtd. in D'Emilio 137).[1] Apparently, the PCA felt only the most opaque references met these qualifications. Films distributed in America, which dealt with homosexual content and that garnered code approval in 1962 were *The Children's Hour*,

Lawrence of Arabia and *Advise and Consent*. None of these films depicted homosexual behavior. None of them even uttered the term "homosexual" (or any of its equivalents). This excessive restraint did not go unnoticed. A *New York Times* reviewer in March, 1962, described *The Children's Hour* as a hopelessly backwards film, "fidgeting and fuming, like some dotty old doll in bombazine with her mouth sagging open in shocked amazement at the whispered hint that a couple of female schoolteachers could be attached to each other by an 'unnatural' love" (qtd. in Rich 187). Still, these three films, no matter how indirectly they approached homosexuality, marked a significant development over, say, 1960, which featured no Hollywood films dealing with same-sex desire. *Advise and Consent* may have depicted its gay bar as a desperate den of iniquity, but at least it acknowledged that such gathering places existed. Similarly, as D'Emilio observes, "Self hate drove Martha to suicide in *The Children's Hour*, but not before movie audiences heard Karen console her with the observation that there were other women who lived this way" (147).

The non-fiction publishing industry had a history of disseminating materials that dealt sympathetically and directly with homosexuality. As early as 1948, Alfred Kinsey's groundbreaking *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* argued that "a considerable portion of the population, perhaps the major portion of the male population, has at least some homosexual experience between adolescence and old age" (610). Just three years later, Greenberg Publishers released Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*.[2] Cory was the pseudonym for Edward Sagarin, a New York teacher who identified as a gay man, despite his suburban life as a husband and father of two children. His book argued for social progress for homosexuals through

minority awareness. According to Loughery, both books were purchased widely by libraries all over America (191). Adding to these early achievements, the nonfiction book industry broke even more new ground in the early sixties with a spate of books presenting an insider's view of the gay world. These ranged from R.E.L. Masters' gay affirmative *The Homosexual Revolution* in 1962 to Jess Stearn's venomous *The Sixth Man.*[3] Jess Stearn, an editor at *Newsweek* who had formerly worked as a reporter for the *New York Daily News*, was actually more of a media insider than a gay insider. His book, which spent three months on the *New York Times* best-seller's list in 1961, allegedly revealed how homosexuals had infiltrated and overtaken a host of industries (fashion, film, advertising), while still finding time to raise divorce rates, aid and abet juvenile delinquency, and de-feminize America's women. Journalism proper also began presenting insider's views of the gay world, most notably *Life* magazine, whose June 26, 1964 issue featured a fourteen-page photo review entitled "Homosexuality in America."

Although these mass-mediated images were almost never positive, their effect on homosexual visibility was. As D'Emilio explains, "the significance of the content paled in comparison with the importance of the sheer quantity of material that portrayed, dissected, and argued about the gay experience in America" (135). The more that images of homosexuality circulated in the media in the early sixties, the more familiar homosexuality became. Not only did this make homosexuality less frightening to many heterosexuals, but also, and perhaps more importantly, it made homosexuality seem less frightening to homosexuals. Homosexuality appeared across the media as a viable way of life, whether laced with social opprobrium or not. The rise of queer neighborhoods in large cities like San Francisco and New York compellingly testified to its practicability.

Evelyn Hooker explains that gay men living in American cities during the sixties often referred to these areas where apartment houses on particular streets were owned and rented exclusively by homosexuals as "the 'swish' Alps" or "boy's town" (93). These gay ghettoes, and their images in the media, provided a focal point around which homosexuals could develop their own culture and become conscious of their newly acquired group power.

Hooker and gay men were not the only ones to take note of these queer neighborhoods. On December 17, 1963, *The New York Times* ran an article entitled "Growth of Overt Homosexuality in City Provokes Wide Concern." Unlike Hooker's gay men, the paper of record found no humor in the existence of gay ghettoes. Instead, the article ominously warned that "the overt homosexual— and those who are identifiable probably represent no more than half of the total—has become such an obtrusive part of the New York scene that the phenomenon needs public discussion" ("Growth" 239). After all, as the article explained, homosexuality was "a problem that has grown in the shadows, protected by taboos on open discussion that have only recently begun to be breached" ("Growth" 239). The problem that the *New York Times* identified was not so much the existence of homosexuals, as their unabashed and massive congregation. The article complained that they "throng Manhattan's Greenwich Village, the East Side from the upper 40's through the 70's and the West 70's" ("Growth" 240). According to the *New York Times* this problem had a solution offered by a group of analytical psychiatrists, "who advocate an end to what it calls a head-in-sand approach to homosexuality . . . They assert that homosexuality can be cured by sophisticated analytical and therapeutic techniques" ("Growth" 240).

Perhaps the most salient feature of this *New York Times* article is not its unabashed homophobia (after all, homophobia was still very much *de rigueur* in the early sixties) or its noisome advertisement for a homosexual "cure," but the way that it depicts two models of homosexuality in direct conflict. On the one hand, swelling ranks of New Yorkers appear to be members of a homosexual subculture, which is laying claim to great swaths of the city. On the other hand, analytical psychiatrists are assuring the straight public that each and every one of these homosexuals is a sick individual requiring treatment. The article thus documents an important shift in thought that was driving the crisis over homosexual definition in the early sixties. Homosexuals, whom mainstream culture had barely acknowledged throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and then only to dismiss them as aberrant individuals and pathological misfits, had somehow attained the status of a social group.

Several authorities voiced opposition to this change in public attitude. Most vociferous among them were American psychoanalysts, and chief among them was Dr. Irving Bieber.[4] Bieber set himself up as the final, affirmative word on whether or not homosexuality was a sickness. In his 1962 book *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study*, Bieber decreed, "All *psychoanalytic* theories assume that adult homosexuality is psychopathologic and assign differing weights to constitutional and experiential determinants" (18). Even though Bieber's own single study depended on modest numbers and dubiously reached conclusions, the medical community supported his claim that homosexuality was a preventable illness, and the press followed suit.[5] Throughout the early sixties, such influential publications as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times* featured Bieber's message in prominent articles.[6] Despite the Bieber juggernaut,

sociology was providing an alternate model of homosexuality based in the interactionist tradition, which emphasized "sociation and interaction as the constitutive acts of the social" (Escoffier 252). Several pioneering sociological accounts— most notably Erving Goffman's 1963 *Stigma*, Howard Becker's 1963 *Outsiders*, and Edwin Schur's 1965 *Crimes Without Victims*— built upon this tradition to counter that homosexuality, disease or not, was a valid subculture existing within the dominant culture of heterosexuality. Meanwhile, some psychologists contradicted Bieber's pathological model of homosexuality outright. Psychologist Evelyn Hooker, for instance, held that significant differences in social adjustment between homosexual and heterosexual "populations could not be reliably distinguished"(qtd. in Bieber 305). Bieber's faith was not shaken. Instead, he dismissed Hooker's study by claiming that, since the implication of her "findings and conclusions are at marked variance with those of our own and other studies, we suspect that the tests themselves . . . are inadequate to discriminating between homosexuals and heterosexuals" (306). In other words, since Hooker found no evidence of homosexual pathology, her study must somehow have mistaken a group of heterosexuals for a group of homosexuals.

Some had opposite fears— that groups of homosexuals might be masquerading as heterosexuals. Not surprisingly, such conspiracy-minded fears of secret homosexual cabals were rooted in cold war ideology.[7] On September 29, 1960, an article entitled "Homosexual International" by the German Countess R. G. Waldeck appeared in *Human Events*, "a weekly Washington, D. C. newsletter that claimed to reach some '40,000 business and political leaders' with 'the news behind the news from the Nation's Capital" (Waldeck 233). According to this article, homosexual neighborhoods appearing in large

cities across America were more than a nuisance. They threatened national security because, as anyone should know, "members of one conspiracy are prone to join another conspiracy" (Waldeck 234). The authors of this article go on to clarify that homosexual groups are so volatile that they endanger American values even when that may not be their ultimate goal: "Without being necessarily Marxist they serve the ends of the communist International in the name of their rebellion against the prejudices, standards, and ideals of the 'bourgeois' world" (Waldeck 234).

Ironically, just months after this article appeared, the first and only American political organization created to serve the interest of homosexuals up to this time was much more endangered than dangerous. This group, the Mattachine Society, did have revolutionary beginnings. Three of the five men who founded it in November 1950, Henry Hay, Bob Hull, and Chuck Rowland, were Communist party members who envisioned a complete restructuring of American society. Nonetheless, as the society expanded into a national organization, its aims narrowed. By May 1953, Hay, Hull, and Rowland stepped down from their leadership positions in the association, and the new leaders began to erase their radical influences. In fact, by the early sixties, Bieber's campaign had destabilized the Mattachine Society more than any cold war conspirator could have hoped. The organization's members were internally divided over whether or not homosexuality was or was not a disease. Besides this troubling impasse, the Mattachine Society suffered from other problems, such as low membership. As John Loughery notes, "the total membership of the Mattachine Society in all of the chapters it was able to establish throughout California, and in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Denver, Chicago, and Detroit, had not exceeded three hundred by 1960" (230). D'Emilio

tells how structural problems also plagued the organization in the sixties: "It had failed to mobilize a constituency and had made virtually no progress toward its minimal goal of opening a dialogue about social attitudes and public policy toward gay men and women" (123). On top of this, in mid-March of 1961, the society's San Francisco headquarters renounced its leadership of the various national chapters. In 1962, R. E. L. Masters would write, "Since that time some of the councils have behaved rather like bodies suddenly deprived of their heads: flopping, floundering and running in aimless circles" (65). Even as homosexuals were achieving group consciousness, they seemed to be losing group leadership.

Queer Literati

Because of this leadership vacuum, the voices of homosexual artists writing about homosexuality in the sixties wielded unusually powerful influence, both in shaping how the heterosexual majority imagined homosexuality and how homosexuals saw themselves. Gay writer Jeffrey Escoffier tells how reading such literature in the early sixties led him to conceive of homosexuality as a way of life, rather than as pathology. According to Escoffier, the homosexual reader could emancipate "himself or herself by coding-over the guilty knowledge acquired by growing up in a homophobic society and potentially [transform] the knowledge of homosexuals living-in-community discovered by reading into the practical knowledge of a collective identity" (258).

Although American gay literature broke through in the early sixties, it had some noteworthy antecedents, even if the authors of these early homosexual stories rarely identified themselves as homosexuals in public. As early as the late nineteenth-century, Charles Warren Stoddard was publishing idyllic tales of white American men finding

love and affection with adoring South Pacific males in *South Sea Idylls* (1873) and *For the Pleasure of His Company: An Affair in the Misty City* (1903). Two novels that took place in thriving gay male communities and depicted homosexuality with good humor book-ended America's jazz age: Carl Van Vechten's 1923 *The Blind Bow-Boy* and Charles Henri Ford's and Parker Tyler's 1933 *The Young and Evil*. Gay pulp fiction, which sensationalized its male homosexual characters before killing them (usually through shame-induced suicide) abounded in the thirties. Some of the more memorable titles are Mrs. Blair Niles' 1931 *Strange Brother*, Andre Tellier's 1931 *Twilight Men*, Richard Meeker's 1933 *Better Angel*, Kennilworth Bruces' 1933 *Goldie*, and Lew Levinson's 1934 *Butterfly Man*. Interestingly, these pulp novels would take on a second life as sixties' paperbacks. Non-pulp novels, which had tentatively begun to deal directly with homosexuality in the twenties, stepped back from the topic in the middle thirties. When homosexuality did appear, it was usually in the background, as in Edger Calmer's 1934 *Beyond the Street*, which presented a homosexual English teacher as an ancillary character or Elliot Paul's 1938 *Concert Pitch*, which featured a subplot of a gay critic doting on an unresponsive pianist. Noir novels of the thirties and forties occasionally included homosexual characters, but they were generally peripheral and underdeveloped, not to mention weak and villainous, as in James M. Caine's 1937 *Serenade* and Raymond Chandler's 1939 *The Big Sleep*. From the forties through the mid-fifties, few novels dealt directly with homosexuality.[8] Visibly gay authors, such as Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and arguably Carson McCullers, explored their characters' fantasy lives in ways that did much to dispel simplistic models of sexual identity. Still, no matter how much these authors infused their writings from the forties and fifties with gay hints and

nuances, all three avoided presenting explicitly homosexual characters. Instead, they told tales of special, strange, gifted people who had no clear place in patriarchal, heteronormative culture, characters who experienced social institutions the way that many homosexuals did, but who did not run in homosexual circles or engage in gay sex (as did their authors). When Williams did finally craft an explicitly gay character, *Suddenly Last Summer's* Sebastion Venerable, he would exist in the play only as a traumatic memory.

Two important gay-authored novels that did appear in the forties and fifties are Gore Vidal's 1948 *The City and the Pillar* and James Baldwin's 1956 *Giovanni's Room*. According to Roger Austen, "Only with the publication of Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* in 1948 did there emerge a main character [in forties fiction] whose gayness was not camouflaged by his being too young, too old, sexually ambivalent, frightened, silly or pathological" (118). Most importantly, Vidal's novel pioneered same-sex images that were simultaneously romantic and sexual. Austen explains that *The City and the Pillar* broke a long-standing literary taboo: "in the nineteenth century males could kiss each other but not disrobe; in the twentieth century they could undress together but not kiss; in *The City and the Pillar* they do both" (118). Although such depictions may seem mild by today's standards, Georges-Michel Sarotte reports that "in 1948 it was such a shocker that the *New York Times* refused to print advertisements for [Vidal's book]" (23). Meanwhile, Baldwin's novel, while not necessarily inaugurating new images of same-sex love, resonated powerfully with gay readers during the Eisenhower years. Austen writes, "the underground was abuzz with the news that James Baldwin had written what in those days passed for 'a really gay novel' (150). Baldwin's attention to detail in reconstructing

the nascent urban gay culture marked him as an insider: "No outsider could have so successfully captured the electric atmosphere during the crucial evening in Guillaume's bar, with all the darting eyes, wistful wisecracks, tiny defeats and breathless victories "(Austen 150). Escoffier bolsters Austen's claim that Baldwin's novel struck a nerve. He declares, "*Giovanni's Room* was the most explicit rendering of homosexual love I had ever encountered. I still have a vivid memory of some of its scenes that date from my first reading" (256). Despite their powerful innovations, Vidal's and Baldwin's books both depicted gay communities as shallow, alien, and corrupting. In *The City and The Pillar*, the main character spends the better part of the novel attempting to recreate the "naturalness" of his first, boyish homosexual experience. His foray into the homosexual underworld prompts one disastrous gay relationship after another, ending with a murder (later revised to a homosexual rape). Baldwin's novel has a similarly bleak view of homosexual communities. Escoffier writes, "Baldwin's novel showed the prefigurative hope of homosexual love . . . undermined by what he portrayed as the nightmarish homosexual underworld of desperate sex . . . [H]omosexual love . . . was doomed to fail, largely because the gay social world could not sustain it" (256).

Several homosexual authors in the late fifties and early sixties began developing understandings of homosexual culture that extended beyond glimpses of stale pick-up lines exchanged in dark, sordid bars. Queer, urban writers like Frank O'Hara, Allan Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and John Rechy began composing experimental texts that more directly targeted gay readers and presented them with broader visions of homosexuality. They did so incrementally, and along different fronts. At times, their visions of homosexual culture were far from flattering. Still, all of these authors depicted

queer worlds that were believably complex, much more so than any images of homosexuality that had appeared before.

Frank O'Hara's Call to Consciousness

In the late fifties and early sixties, Frank O'Hara raised homosexual consciousness by crafting poems that addressed explicitly queer audiences. Nevertheless, gay critics have been slow to reclaim O'Hara. Gregory Bredeck suggests that such critics are reticent to recognize O'Hara as a gay artist because his work "centralizes homosexuality as a linguistic practice rather than a thematic practice" ("Barthes" 268). Rather than crafting images of explicit sexual acts, O'Hara's poems use language to go to the heart of queerness and challenge the stability of fixed identity categories. O'Hara's 1958 poem "In Memory of My feelings" features a stanza that presents such shifting identifications across race, gender and sexuality:

> Grace
> To be born and live as variously as possible. The conception
> Of the masque barely suggests the sordid identifications.
> I am a Hittite in love with a horse. I don't know what blood's
> in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs
> in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall
> I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist
> in which a face appears
> and it is another face of blonde I am a baboon eating a banana
> I am a dictator looking at his wife I am a doctor eating a child
> and the child's mother smiling I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain
> I am a child smelling his father's underwear I am an Indian
> sleeping on a scalp
> and my pony is stamping in the birches,
> and I've just caught sight of the *Niña*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria*.
> What land is this so free? (*Complete* 256)

Some of these identifications, most notably " a jockey with a sprained ass-hole" and "a child smelling his father's underwear" strongly connote male homosexuality. Still, the poem does not stop to focus on these images. Instead, it rushes ahead to celebrate their

ephemerality. In response to this poem, David Jarraway writes, "I want to remain firm in resisting the temptation to view O'Hara's queer perversities as an artful dodge in response to a punishing homophobic period in American history" (85). Instead of interpreting O'Hara's fluctuating self-recognition as a poetic strategy for denying his queerness, Jarraway links O'Hara's multiple identifications to Oscar Wilde's attack on the notion of stable subjectivity in his novel *Dorian Gray*: "[Dorian Gray] used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceived the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex, multiform creature" (qtd. in Jarraway 84). Jarraway's bridge between Wilde and O'Hara interprets O'Hara's exaltation of multiple selves as an embrace of queer subjectivity, rather than as some feeble avoidance of it. O'Hara dedicated this poem to his best friend, Grace Hartigan, and the line "Grace/ To be born and live as variously as possible" is etched on his tombstone. Both of these facts strengthen Jarraway's claim that O'Hara proclaimed his "protean self" as an act of queer assertion, not queer denial.

O'Hara famously opposed the confessional poets, not because he feared openness, but because, as Grace Hartigan put it, he wanted a poetry that showed "how to be *open* but not violated, how *not to panic*" (qtd. in Perloff 141). Similarly, O'Hara specifically champions the abstract expressionists "because they are not isolated. So, out of this populated cavern of self come brilliant, uncomfortable works, works that don't reflect you or your life . . . Art is not *your* life, it is someone else's" (*Art* 6). This cautious move towards the communal also marks O'Hara's Personism, which he describes in casually queer terms: "It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones . . . a day in which I

was in love with someone (not Roi by the way, a blonde). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing a poem, and so Personism was born"(*Complete* 499). Terrell Scott Herring observes that O'Hara's equation between a poem and a telephone call suggests that "there is no distinction between the language found in the poem and the language of everyday life" (417). Perhaps more importantly, this everyday life is a queer one where O'Hara might be in love with Roi, even if he is not. In fact, O'Hara's manifesto goes even further towards presenting poetry as a way to build queer communities when he writes, " [Personism] puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages" (*Complete* 499). O'Hara's Lucky Pierre metaphor, which presents each poem as a third man with and through whom two gay males have sex, implies that he wants his poems to act as some sort of bond between him and his gay readers.

John Lowney argues that O'Hara's 1959 poem "The Day Lady Died" "loses much of its resonance without historical knowledge of the day it records" (117). The poem similarly loses much of its resonance without acknowledging Billie Holiday's iconic significance to homosexuals in the fifties and sixties. Just as Judy Garland's death would unite rioters at the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969, O'Hara's elegy builds to an epiphany of minority identification and shared remorse at the moment of this other gay icon's death. In the third stanza, the poem's action shows O' Hara acting not as a specifically gay man, but as just another educated, liberal-minded urbanite shopping at a book store.

He flippantly works his way through a list of literary authors, two of whom are notably gay:

> and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
> for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
> think of Hesoid, trans. Richard Latimore or
> Brendan Behan's new play or Le Balcon or Les Nègres
> of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
> after practically going to sleep with quandariness (*Complete* 325)

His fantasy of cosmopolitan anonymity shatters when he encounters "a NEW YORK POST with her face on it" (*Complete* 325). Suddenly, O'Hara finds himself occupying an anxious, vulnerable body in the bathroom of a jazz club: "and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of/ leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT/ while she whispered a song along the keyboard/ to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing" (*Complete* 325). Whether or not this club's john door is specifically designed for gay johns remains ambiguous, but the poem's conclusion vividly conveys the poet's shocked recovery of his debased gay male body upon encountering the death of his idol. Significantly, this shock spurs a minority consciousness that connects him to others like himself, as "everyone and I stopped breathing" (*Complete* 325).

"The Day Lady Died" places a body between the poet and other gay men, but, despite O'Hara's Lucky Pierre metaphor, that body is not male. It is the lifeless body of a once quite volatile female star. Richard Dyer writes that Judy Garland's disaster-prone "image constituted a kind of going public or coming out before the emergence of gay liberationist politics" (*Heavenly* 145).[9] Other troubled female stars similarly acted as focal points for the homosexual community, and O'Hara often uses their images to invoke gay male consciousness. His 1962 poem "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") echoes "The Day Lady Died," by again positioning the body of a fallen

female star between himself and his readers. Once more, the star appears via the front page of a newspaper:

> and suddenly I see a headline
> LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
> there is no snow in Hollywood
> there is no rain in California
> I have been to lots of parties
> and acted perfectly disgraceful
> but I never actually collapsed
> oh Lana Turner we love you get up (*Complete* 449)

While "The Day Lady Died" marks a somber occasion, "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") marks the tragicomedy of Lana Turner's parade through the tabloid press in the early sixties. In 1958, Lana Turner had publicly revealed sordid details from her sex life with her gangster husband Johnny Stompanato during her daughter's trial for Stompanato's murder. Her career faltered as a result, and the tabloids often published sensational headlines about her drunken exploits. According to Herring, O'Hara's poem builds on this tabloid discourse "to create a community of impersonal observers who gather over a fallen star"(420). The poem's scenario, however, seems more accurately rooted in queerness than coldness. It is not hard to imagine gay men in the early sixties, many of whom regarded their own sex lives as sordid, potentially career-destroying secrets, identifying with Turner, even as they sensed humor in her situation. O'Hara's poem draws on such identifications to project the image of a homosexual community spanning from O'Hara in rainy, snowy New York City to unknown others in rainless, snow-less Hollywood. The poem does not end with an anonymous mob judging a disgraced star, but with a collection of fans, quite probably queer ones, exclaiming "Lana Turner we love you get up" (*Complete* 449).

Allen Ginsberg's Subversive Acts

While O'Hara's fifties and sixties poetry carefully addressed a diffuse homosexual sub-culture circulating within the dominant culture, the Beats' writings from the same period situated homosexuality beyond the realm of this dominant culture and celebrated its resistance to middle class America's demands for conformity. Catherine Stimpson explains, "Indeed and in deed, [the Beats] could valorise the homosexual as a rebel who seize[d] freedom and proclaim[ed] the legitimacy of individual desire" (373). In particular, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs "were friends [and former lovers] who shared a fealty to rebellion in general and sexual rebellion in particular" (Stimpson 382). Their shared strategy for depicting homosexuality as an act of political dissent was radically to alter its forms of expression. For these gay artists, "affirming homosexuality [demanded] the disdain of a sensibility that [fed] on concealment and camp, parody and irony . . . [Instead] the Beats prized candor and honesty, energy and rage" (Stimpson 375). Through such new representational strategies, the Beats generated the image of the homosexual hipster, whose pose of social protest allowed gays to "perceive themselves as nonconformists rather than deviates, as rebels against stultifying norms rather than immature, unstable personalities" (D'Emilio 181). The Beats elevated homosexuality from a subculture of alleged social rejects to a counter-culture of social agitators.

Among the Beats, Ginsberg most clearly celebrated homosexuality as a political force. His 1956 poem "Howl" rages against the state by exalting those "who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and/ screamed with joy/ who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors" (64). The poem implies that queer sex is an inherently political act with the power to destabilize the state. In fact,

Ginsberg would later describe "Howl" in explicitly political terms as a "crucial moment of breakthrough, . . . a breakthrough in the sense of a public statement of feelings and emotions and attitudes" (qtd. in D'Emilio 181). Stimpson rightfully suggests that Ginsberg's inclusion of sodomy as just one among many subversive political acts seems "to be repudiating the modern notion of homosexuality as an identity and bringing back the older description of it as an event" (389). In many ways, Ginsberg's model of homosexual agency does turn back to earlier understandings of same-sex desire. For instance, in the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman was already celebrating "the personal and passionate attachment of man to man—which, hard to define, underlies the lessons and ideals of the profound saviors of every land and age" (qtd. in Stimpson 376). Stimpson emphasizes that "Ginsberg was to dedicate *The Fall of America: Poems of these States 1965-1971* . . . to Whitman, and use this passage in full as his epigraph" (376). Ginsberg's return to Whitman was explicit and strategic. By linking his own utopian vision of homosexuality to Whitman's from a century before, Ginsberg was able to bolster homosexuality's status as a potent social force, which the Beats were reclaiming from the grip of cultural repression.

Ginsberg's utopian homosexuality was imperfect even on its own terms. Although he re-imagined homosexuality as a political position "and brought out of history a Whitmanesque tradition to support [it, he] did not re-imagine and revise deep patternings of maleness and femaleness, masculine and feminine" (Stimpson 391). Instead, his and the other Beats' wholesale rejection of "momism" and its instances of alleged female authority, such as marriage, commitment, sexual fidelity and domesticity in general, often collapsed into misogyny, which then fueled a kind of homophobia. For instance, "Howl"

explicitly counterpoises devouring, apolitical women to its joyous, liberating homosexual men. In a travesty of the three fates, Ginsberg bemoans "the one eyed/ shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that/ winks out of the womb and the one eyed shrew that does/ nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden/ threads" (64). This conflation of the feminine with an alleged domestic regime of sexual repression led Ginsberg to equate effeminacy in men with power-induced corruption. For instance, he describes J. Edgar Hoover as "a cruel Faggot" (*Airplane* 2). Such homophobia saturates the Beat canon. Stimpson writes, "Like a Medieval devil, the figure of the fag personifies any number of evils: Narcissism, effeminacy, snobbery, silliness, hypocrisy, elitism, conservatism. Neither manly nor egalitarian nor frank, . . . [the fag] titter[s] away in the closet" (378). Although Ginsberg and the Beats inaugurated explicitly political understandings of homosexuality, they often did so at the expense of homosexuals.

William Burroughs' Public Catharsis

William Burroughs' assault on "momism" was much more vitriolic than was Ginsberg's, and his images of homosexuality much more disruptive. Burroughs, the WASP scion of a wealthy St. Louis family, had rejected his birthright of upper-middle class privilege long before he met Ginsberg, and had spent the thirties exploring gay underworlds. By the early forties, he was tending bar in an area of Forty-second street so populated with hustlers "that the cops and the journalists referred to it as 'Queens County'" (MacAdams 125). Here, homosexuality mingled freely with violence, as it would in his fiction. His novel *Naked Lunch*, published by Olympia Press in France in 1959 and by Grove Press in the United States in 1962, presented anti-utopian homosexual images that contrasted sharply to Ginsberg's celebration of same-sex couplings. These

images would ignite a firestorm in the courts and the literary press. As Michael Barry Goodman explains, "*Naked Lunch* hit a sensitive cultural nerve . . . It dealt vividly with the interrelationship of sex and violence . . . To a society which wished to view sex as related to affection, the connections Burroughs had made in his book were intolerable" (2). The gay community has at times been just as likely as the straight community to denounce Burroughs. As Gregory Woods notes, "There are many [gay] readers who would argue that Burroughs is not gay at all, but a rather old-fashioned kind of homosexual who has never contributed, or sought to contribute, to the momentum of social change" (40). These readers would be short sighted indeed. Burroughs explains that he meant for *Naked Lunch* to be nothing less than revolutionary: "I was shitting out my educated Middlewest background once and for all. It's a matter of catharsis, where I say the most horrible things I can think of. Realize that—the most horrible, dirty slimy awful niggardliest posture possible" (qtd. in Charters 103). *Naked Lunch*, although not composed using the cut-up method that Burroughs would later apply to his Nova trilogy, still juxtaposes competing discourses culled from popular culture as the cut-ups do. It convincingly duplicates fifties and sixties America's most virulent homophobic discourses and lays them naked on the page.[10]

Burroughs' images of gender and sexuality seethe with the anxieties that fifties and sixties culture attached to such issues. Oliver Harris suggests that "complicity to all he opposes is the condition of [Burroughs'] work's extraordinary brinkmanship"(244). The distance that Burroughs can claim from his novel's outrageous displays of misogyny and homophobia is certainly more open to debate than Harris seems willing to admit. Still, what makes these images of misogyny and homophobia so disturbing is their

alarming familiarity. One scene from the chapter "A. J.'s Annual Party" replicates the misogyny of the *vagina dentata*. Barbara Walker explains that this figure of a toothed vagina is "the classic symbol of men's fear of [female sexuality], expressing the unconscious belief that a woman may eat or castrate her partner during intercourse"(1034).[11] Burroughs writes, "Johnny extracts a candiru from Mary's cunt with his calipers . . . He gives her a douche of jungle bone softener, her vaginal teeth flow out mixed with blood and cysts" (*Naked* 90). Perhaps the most distressing aspect of this gruesome passage is its legibility as an echo of earlier images. Burroughs' moreover links his incendiary depiction to modern advertising, which arguably reconfigures aspects of the *vagina dentata* to sell hygiene products. He caps off this description with a perverse blend of pornographic speech and what could be the closing line of a television commercial: "her cunt shines fresh and sweet as spring grass" (*Naked* 90-91).

Just as Burroughs' text repeats and exaggerates misogynistic fears of female flesh, it also expresses homosexual panic reactions that saturated fifties and sixties culture. These panic reactions come from opposing viewpoints: a fear of unstable queer identity, which shows up as mutating flesh, and an almost inverse dread of overdetermined sexuality, which spurs *Naked Lunch*'s horrific scenarios of excessively policed bodies. Richard Dellamora argues, "Burroughs was a queer without the benefit of knowledge of what a sexual minority might be. For him, the consequences of this absence were apocalyptic" (137). Dellamora implies that, if only Burroughs knew what we know now, he would have been happy to adopt a stable homosexual minority identity. This claim seems unnecessarily condescending. After all, Burroughs was not unaware of attempts to normalize homosexual identity: he was repulsed by them. He complained bitterly about

Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America*. He especially bristled at Cory's admonition for queers to turn the other cheek in order to assimilate: "Let him learn that sort of thing if he wants to. I never swallowed the other cheek routine, and I hate the stupid bastards who won't mind their own business. They can die in agony for all I care" (*Letters* 106).

Although Dellamora mistakes Burroughs' orneriness for ignorance, he is correct to suggest that *Naked Lunch* communicates apocalyptic anxieties regarding the homosexual body. *Naked Lunch*'s talking asshole sequence, for instance, imagines anal eroticism overtaking a male body:

> After a while the ass started talking on its own. He would go in without anything prepared and his ass would ad-lib and toss the gags back at him every time.
>
> Then it developed sort of teeth-like little raspy incurving hooks and started eating. He thought this was cute at first and built an act around it, but the asshole would eat its way through his pants and start talking on the street, shouting out it wanted equal rights. It would get drunk, too, and have crying jags nobody loved it and it wanted to be kissed same as any other mouth. Finally it talked all the time day and night, you could hear him for blocks screaming at it to shut up, and beating it with his fist, and sticking candles up it, but nothing did any good and the asshole said to him: "It's you who will shut up in the end. Not me. Because we don't need you around here anymore. I can talk and eat *and* shit. (*Naked* 120)

Eventually, the asshole takes over all of this body's functions, while undifferentiated tissue covers the man's face. Burroughs' anecdote literalizes the dominant culture's fears of gay sex (here exemplified by heightened anal awareness) producing alien, uncontrollable bodies shouting for equal rights on the street. This anecdote's imagery hits such an outrageous pitch that it begins to mock the very homophobia it reproduces. It teeters between equating homosexuals with assholes and presenting those who oppose homosexuality as the sort of people who would equate homosexuals with assholes.

Burroughs' description of the day he wrote this section suggests that he intended to satirize the impulse to normalize queer bodies:

> So finally I say "now you must work," and smoke some tea and sit down and out comes all in one piece like a glob of spit: the incredibly obscene thinly disguised references and situations that slip by in grade B movies, the double entendres, perversions, sadism of popular songs, poltergeist knockings and mutterings of America's putrefying unconscious, boils that swell until they burst with a fart noise as if the body had put out an auxiliary ass hole with a stupid belligerent Bronx cheer. (qtd. in Goodman 114)

As Burroughs himself suggests, his images of metamorphosing queer flesh resonate because they have already been circulating in a variety of mass cultural discourses.

Naked Lunch also depicts sexuality as a function of technology and violence. Jamie Russell observes that the novel depicts "scientists, psychiatrists, and surgeons, headed by Doctors Berger and Benway" deploying sexual identity formation as a method for regulating and controlling populations (44). Russell rightly compares this scenario to the American medical establishment's invasive methods for "curing" non-heterosexual desire. He reports that at the time of *Naked Lunch*'s publication in France, "a report on patients at the New York Pilgrim State Hospital concluded that lobotomy had little effect on sexual behavior, but this was after large numbers of irreversible experiments on institutionalized gay men had been undertaken" (44). In Burroughs novel, the goal of such procedures is ironically reversed. The novel's interviews between Carl and Dr. Benway, for instance, reveal Benway remaking Carl into a homosexual, so that he can better marginalize and manage him. Similarly, the novel's most notorious chapter, "A. J.'s Annual Party," presents sexuality as a continuum delineated by violent urges and actions. The chapter, as if approximating some surreal pornographic film, stages an explicitly detailed orgy between two men and a woman that takes place across impossible

spans of time and space. The orgy reaches its height when the heterosexual couple hangs the passive homosexual male as they sexually stimulate him. After the passive male's death, the active male assaults and sexually humiliates the woman.

Naked Lunch's explicit blending of sexuality and violence sparked a series of censorship actions against it. Goodman argues that the *Naked Lunch* trials marked "the last complete example of the censorship of literature . . . because it was censored by academia, the U.S. Post Office, the U.S. Customs Service, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and the city of Los Angeles" (1). The book's censorship battles began in October 1959, when U.S. customs seized a review copy of the book while it was en route from Olympia Press in France to Grove Press in New York. Federal, state and municipal trials ensued, not ending until July 1966, when the Massachusetts high court ruled that Burroughs' book "could not be considered 'utterly without redeeming social value'"(qtd. in Goodman 243). The court's decision rested largely on the Anglophone literary community's response to *Naked Lunch* (Goodman 243).

This critical reception greatly preceded the book's English language publication, due in large part to its sensational censorship. Several newspaper articles featured literary authorities testifying to the book's merits or lack thereof, and Norman Mailer commented positively on excerpts from the book in his *Advertisements for Myself*. Grove Press even distributed a sixteen-page publicity booklet for *Naked Lunch*, which featured testimonials from Mailer, Terry Southern, E. S. Seldon, Robert Lowell, Jack Kerouac, and John Ciardi. The novel's already conspicuous and divisive literary debate spiked in 1962, when Grove published the book in the U.S. As Goodman reports, critics perceived *Naked Lunch* "as either the death knell of civilized man, or the next step in the progress

of the English novel beyond Joyce" (159). Despite all the fury, few reviewers in the English language press mentioned the novel's explicit depictions of homosexuality. An exception that proves the rule is an anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement*, who cited the book's homosexual imagery only to dismiss it. The reviewer claimed *Naked Lunch* "tastes disgusting even without the detailed but always callous homosexual scenes and the unspeakable homosexual fantasies—pure verbal masturbation—that figure so largely in Olympia Press volumes" (qtd. in Goodman 166).[12] The vast majority of reviewers simply ignored the homosexuality altogether and focussed on *Naked Lunch*'s depictions of heroine addiction, which as Oliver Harris explains, has "long been determined by an undisputed assumption [to be Burroughs'] master trope and driving force" (245).

Despite such critical closeting in the literary press, the sixties courts very specifically targeted those chapters of *Naked Lunch* that featured explicit homosexual acts for censorship. Gregory Woods' gay readers might have found Burroughs' work politically unimportant, but those who would censor homosexuality in the sixties apparently felt otherwise. As Goodman explains, "*Naked Lunch* was part of a social, intellectual, and political protest which affected the entire Western World in the late 1960's" (170). Burroughs' novel, by depicting sexual selfhood as an object, and perhaps an effect, of social engineering, ensured that a radical rethinking of homosexuality and its representations would figure largely in this revolution.

John Rechy's Lush Nocturne

John Rechy's 1963 *City of Night* was less concerned with the status of homosexuality in the future, and more intent on liberating queer urban underworlds from

their then-current sorry representational status. In the early sixties, this status lay somewhere between mainstream invisibility and the one-dimensionality found in Vidal's and Balwin's novels. In opposition to rare, dismissive glimpses, Rechy's novel presented an abundance of details drawn from his own considerable experience as a participant in homosexual netherworlds. Rechy, like some real-life midnight cowboy, was born in Texas and relocated to New York City, where he "began a period of hustling and drifting that . . . form the basis of [his] first novel" (Bredbeck "John" 341). Ricardo L. Ortiz calls *City of Night* "a beat novel of existential drift"(42), and in some ways *City of Night* is a gay(er) version of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road.* Kerouac's Sal Paradise and Rechy's nameless hustler both roam from coast to coast in search of adventures. Along the way, both also bear witness to rich, complicated worlds, whose intricacy they render in naturalistic detail. Still, the novels significantly differ. Kerouac's Sal Paradise documents pockets of America's fading regionalism, which mostly act as backdrops for his homosocial revels with a few hip friends. Meanwhile, Rechy's narrator carefully charts a myriad of thriving and interconnecting queer worlds, which he fully enters in order to have sex for money with a wide variety of men.

Ben Gove reports that *City of Night* "gained a degree of national attention preceded only by the failed 1957 obscenity case surrounding Allen Ginsberg's queerly promiscuous poem, 'Howl'" (41). Some of this attention was very positive. Frank O'Hara lauded Rechy's attention to detail, which he praised through imitation, claiming Rechy "gets marvelously accurately the Exact tone of homosexual bar talk . . . Which is something, since I don't know any other writer around recently who has managed this feat Unsquarely" (*Standing* 160). Not all members of the gay community have been as

welcoming of Rechy as was O'Hara. Adherents of post-Stonewall gay identity politics often judged him harshly for his alleged "status as a homophobically defensive hustler 'outlaw' from gay culture" (Gove 42). Moreover, from the viewpoint of current lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender alliances, Rechy's "normalization, and even naturalization, of masculine-identified forms of gay male promiscuity can be seen as symptomatic both of the long-ingrained dominant cultural privileging of gender-conformist male sexuality . . . and of the specifically gay male reproduction of this heteropatriarchal ideology" (Gove 50). Such criticisms, although providing potent political gambits in today's debates, seem unfair to the author, whose concerns in the early sixties may have legitimately differed from those of our contemporary queer writers. As Rechy explains, his novel's narrator reveals a questioning of identity that belongs to a very specific historical moment: "*City of Night* "represented quite honestly where I was at the time. I didn't bullshit. I was honest. So I am fond of confessing that *City of Night* is a very honest book about a dishonest person" (qtd. in Gove 44). Critics who identify the psychological limitations of the book's narrator, and then read *City of Night* as a ringing endorsement of such limitations, fundamentally misinterpret the text. Moreover, they misjudge this book's importance to the development of gay culture.

City of Night, far from positioning its hustler narrator as an outlaw from gay culture, fully ensconces its narrator in homosexual underworlds. The narrator is instead an outlaw from straight culture. His adventure begins, after all, with his flight from El Paso, where his mother stands "by the kitchen door crying, as she always would be in my mind" (22). For the rest of the novel, the narrator is on the run from the threat of such dreary domesticity: "I would go to freedom: New York!—embarking on that journey

through nightcities and nightlives—looking for I don't know what—perhaps some substitute for salvation" (22). The novel significantly reverses mid-twentieth cultural designations, which usually presented heterosexuality and family life as rich and vital, while the plight of the homosexual was hopeless and sad. In *City of Night* the straight world is the place of sadness, and its geographic representative is El Paso, Texas, a desert town that Rechy depicts as a sweeping vista of relentless sterility. Meanwhile, the queer world holds promise, excitement, and perhaps even something like salvation.

Stanton Hoffman's 1964 hysterical, and deeply homophobic, reaction to Rechy's book signals just how unfamiliarly rich Rechy's depictions of queer spaces were to many mainstream readers. Hoffman complains that the novel's "'gay world' and all its parts overwhelm . . . the existence of the particular characters . . . especially what is meant to be the center of focus in that novel, the narrator as character" (195). Hoffman continues to bemoan "the multitude of details, the immensity of details concerning the hustler's world and the "gay world" [as] ultimately part of journalistic impulse" (203). For Hoffman, this abundance of details distracts from what Rechy should be doing, which is "creat[ing] a metaphor for an American reality"(204). Earlier in his review, Hoffman explains that Rechy misses the perfect opportunity to use homosexuality as a metaphor for denouncing America's " casual attitude towards relationships, its interest in celebrity, its concern for form as separate from content, its superficiality and interest in trivia, its materialism, its obsession with youth, and its indifference to either a politically motivated or socially responsible life" (196). Hoffman then dismisses *City of Night* as a "homosexual travelogue, "which translates homosexuality and homosexual love into a too restricted social phenomenon" (205).

Hoffman's critical perceptions here are as lucid as his homophobic conclusions are myopic. *City of Night* is a gay travelogue of sorts. In fact, it celebrates pockets of gay culture thriving in cities all over America, and in neighborhoods throughout these cities. At one point in the novel, the narrator itemizes New York City's queerest spaces. He uncovers a gay cruising culture in the New York Public library. Afterwards, he rapidly discovers more homosexual gathering spots: "Third Avenue, the East 50s . . . the Howard Thomson's restaurant on 8th street . . .the bars: on the west side, the east side, in the Village; one in Queens . . . [and] Central Park—between the 60s and 70s on the west side" (61-62). This must have been a windfall to young gay men living in the New York vicinity in the early sixties. Similarly, Hoffman correctly notes *City of Night*'s immensely detailed vision of queer culture, which presents an unusually wide array of homosexual types.

> In Miss Destiny there is the despair of doing what one can not help doing and the madness of the masculinity-femininity obsession; in Chuck there is the desire to "play it cool," to get simply through life, and the dream of innocence once had, in this case, a dream of horses; in Lance and dean there is the obsession with youth, narcissism, and the use of love to gain objects; and in the man on the beach there is repression and fear. (201)

Hoffman perceives the "elaborateness and fullness of the presentation of the hustler's world" (201), but only to determine that Rechy must be attempting to mirror "the larger context of America" (201).

Of course, what Rechy is really doing is presenting queer worlds of such expanse that they can at once contain at least four familiar, and official, paradigms of homosexuality: sexual inversion, arrested development, narcissism, and paranoia. *City of Night*'s queer underworld also presents less familiar and less clinically constructed images of homosexuality coexisting in its expanse. Ben Gove details the way that

Rechy's novel complicates inversion models of homosexuality by presenting two very different types of drag queens, the "respectable woman and tough girl" (68). Miss Destiny, with her soft-spoken manners, her dreams of a white wedding, and her careful attention to the butch hustlers' egos exemplifies the fifties good girl.[13] *City of Night* also features a drag fifties bad girl, a young, black queen who passes out sexual invitations (printed on business cards no less) to every butch looking man she meets.[14] As Gove explains, not only does this sequence complicate the idea of sexual inversion by mocking fifties gender models, but it also presents a powerful image of black, queer sexual agency (69). *City of Night* also presents as-yet-to-be identified homosexual types simultaneously circulating through its homosexual economies: "There are the young and the goodlooking ones—the ones about whom you wonder why they prefer to pay someone . . . when there exists—much, much vaster than the hustling world—the world of unpaid, mutually desiring males—the easy pickups"(36). Here, the hustling narrator dismisses this unfamiliar kind of homosexuality, but its promise will haunt him throughout the novel. Moreover, by including such imagery, Rechy suggests that gay worlds hold much that is yet to be discovered.

Another of Hoffman's complaints proves useful when divorced from his conclusions. He writes that the novel obscures "the literal relationship of the 'I' to the hustling world . . . throughout the novel one does not know what this 'I' really is" (203). For Hoffman this is a failure in characterization, yet *City of Night* clearly emphasizes the ambiguity of its narrator's identity. He does after all remain nameless. In addition, the narrator's role as a male hustler, one who has sex for 'trade," while projecting a straight identity, gives him an unstable homosexual identity, even has he performs homosexual

acts. Chris Cagle, writing about the figure of the trade-man, the straight identified man who occasionally has sex with other men, explains that this figure's"disjuncture between identity—and behavior-based categorizations of sexuality becomes dizzying upon examination . . . Is [his] self-proclamation of straightness . . . a performance or the guise of a performance" Does [his] identity lie with his proclamation [of straightness] or with his hidden feelings?" (246). Rechy's narrator appears to take great pleasure in the uncertainty of his sexual identity. In fact, he enthusiastically embraces sexuality and identity as mutually dependent performances: "I learned that there are a variety of roles to play if you're hustling: youngmanoutof ajob butlooking; dontgiveadamnyoungman drifting; perrenialhuslter easytomakeout; youngmanlostinthebigcity pleasehelpmesir" (36).

Hoffman's most persistent complaint illuminates *City of Night*'s historical importance: "the presence then of the 'I,' the narrator, of this novel is rather implicit than explicit, and seems throughout to be overwhelmed by a large body of material" (200). This large body of material that so annoys Hoffman can more accurately be understood to be the great proliferation of ideas, many of them quite contradictory, about homosexuality and homosexual persons. *City of Night* captured these ideas and understandings and wove from them a richly textured tapestry of homosexual life. It showed the queer underworld as an unpredictable space from which something like salvation could erupt at any moment. In the process, it presented both gay culture and straight culture with a complex vision of homosexuality and sexual identity in flux.

Projecting Homosexualities

The work of these queer authors at the start of the sixties not only inaugurated newly explicit depictions of queerness. They also filled an aesthetic vacuum left by the de-homosexualization of camp. From the time of Oscar Wilde up until the fifties, camp and its reversals of conventional notions of value had given homosexuality a distinct artistic voice. By the sixties, however, camp ceased to speak only for homosexuals and went mainstream in a big way. Already in 1954, a character from Christopher Isherwood's *The World in the Evening* could eschew gay camp for this new, much more diffuse camp:

> You thought [camp] meant a swishy little boy with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich? Yes, in queer circles, they call *that* camping. It's all very well in its place, but it's an utterly debased form— . . . What I mean by camp is something much more fundamental. You can call the other Low Camp, if you like; then what I'm talking about is High Camp. High camp is the whole emotional basis of Ballet, for example, and of course of Baroque art . . . Baroque art is largely camp about religion. The Ballet is camp about love . . . (110).

Here, Isherwood's definition of camp, so broad that it not only includes an entire school of art, but an entire art form, foreshadows the not-so-homosexual uses that camp would be put to in the sixties. Andrew Ross sees camp's transformation from a purely homosexual taste to a much more widespread popular taste occurring as early as 1950, with the release of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (311). Afterwards, camp strategies began appearing in cultural displays far removed from homosexual culture. Ross specifically cites the Mods' camp appropriation of the Union Jack (312).

From this vantagepoint, Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," which originally appeared in the not-very-gay *Partisan Review* embodies a sort of highbrow

epiphany of camp's increased estrangement from specifically homosexual concerns. As Ross argues, Sontag's essay has a very non-queer agenda. It liberates camp from gay culture and enlists its use as tool for the dominant culture: "Her formula . . . suggests that what is under attack in an age of mass culture is precisely the power of taste-making intellectuals . . . and that the significance of the 'new sensibility' of camp in the 1960s is that it presents a means of salvaging that privilege" (315).[15] Ross suggests that rather than challenging the dominant culture with oppositional notions of worth, camp bolstered the sixties culture industry. It "shaped, defined, and negotiated the way in which 1960s intellectuals were able to 'pass' as subscribers to the throwaway Pop aesthetic, and thus as patrons of the attractive world of immediacy and disposability created by the culture industries" (Ross 309).

Camp's dissolution as a specifically gay discourse and the pioneering work of O'Hara, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Rechy would strongly influence the queer cinema of the sixties underground. Anger, Smith, and Warhol, all of whom to varying degrees identified themselves as homosexuals, would all take up O'Hara's call to queer consciousness. O'Hara's idea of assembling queer communities from the remnants of celebrity culture, especially its stars, would find amphetimenic expression in Anger's *Scorpio Rising,* approximate cultism in Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, and achieve rational, regularity in Warhol's factory, which arguably approximated the machinery of classic Hollywood to produce queer glamour. Ginsberg's articulation of homosexuality as a joyous, and potentially subversive act finds its echo in the disruptive antics of Anger's not-so-saintly motorcyclists, Smith's re-politicization of camp, and Warhol's homosexualization of the everyday world.

The brazenness of Burroughs' sexual imagery and the scope of Rechy's queer vision greatly expanded homosexuality's possible representations in literature and the popular imagination. Burroughs, in his fantastic mode, and Rechy, in his hyper-journalistic style, each record wildly divergent theories and understandings of homosexuality noisily coexisting. Anger, Smith and Warhol would not only build on these authors' advances in depicting homosexuality, but they would also amplify their documentary impulse. They would draw on avant-garde cinematic traditions to capture the fusion of two important cultural projects of the sixties: the radical reassessment of homosexuality and the push to expand the realm of representability in language and art. They would take up avant-garde cinema's project of broadening film's representational reach and give it a queer inflection. By making films that depicted queer life in 1960s New York, these filmmakers would not only document this era's very public contest over homosexual definition. They would help shape it. These filmmakers crafted previously unseen images of same-sex desire, underground homosexualities, which not only challenged ideas of the time, but which continue to question assumptions about sexuality and identity. In 1963, Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, and Warhol's *Kiss* and *Haircut (No. 1)* admirably refused normalizing models of sexual identity, which pressed in from outside the burgeoning gay community. Today, these films' careful depictions of homosexuality in flux can serve queer culture once again. As the gay community's uneasy alliance with consumer culture spurs normalizing influences from within, these films' daring visions, like those of their literary counterparts, provide strategies for reasserting homosexuality as radically undefined and queerness as the refusal of the status quo.

Notes

[1] R.E.L. Masters suggests how far Hollywood had fallen behind popular consciousness of homosexuality. In his 1962 book *The Homosexual Revolution,* he reports that, after being advised that Hollywood could now treat homosexual themes, Hedda Hopper supposedly remarked, "Well, all I've got to say is that our producers shouldn't have any trouble with casting" (155). Apparently, even the decidedly middlebrow Hopper judged the PCA as being behind the times in its treatment of sexual themes.

[2] Loughery notes that Greenberg published homosexual fiction as well, notably such gay classics as *Twilight Men* and *Better Angel* in the thirties and *The Divided Path* in 1949 (195).

[3] Other significant popular nonfiction books of this type include Alfred A. Gloss's 1962 *Strangers in Our Midst*, Donald Webster Cory's and John P. Leroy's 1963 *The Homosexual and His Society: A View from Within*, Hendrik Ruitenbeek's 1963 *The Problem of Homosexuality in Modern Society*, Jess Stearn's 1964 *The Grape Vine: A Report on the Secret World of the Lesbian* and Donald Webster Cory's and John P. Leroy's 1964 *The Lesbian in America.*

[4] Two other important psychiatric texts from the period that reaffirmed homosexuality's alleged status as an illness were Edmund Bergler's 1957 *Homosexuality: Disease or a Way of Life* and Albert Ellis's 1964 *Homosexuality: Its Causes and Cure.*

[5] Loughery documents Bieber's slim evidence for psychoanalysis's power to "cure" homosexuals: "Of the seventy-two men Bieber & Co. worked with who were exclusively homosexual, fourteen, or 19 percent, 'became' heterosexual after sufficient time in therapy and fourteen 'became' bisexual. The unchanged (read obstinate) 62 percent of this group didn't dampen the enthusiasm of the researchers one whit" (164).

[6] D'Emilio presents a complete list of articles from these publications that featured Bieber between 1962 and 1965 (162).

[7] Robert J. Corber reports that cold warriors in the U.S. Senate had pronounced homosexual individuals to be national security risks as early as the late 1940s (63-64).

[8] See Austen and Sarotte for a list of the few novels that do deal directly with homosexuality and for more on depictions of homosexuality in American literature throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

[9] The sixties playwright Joe Orton testifies to Dyer's claim: "some [gay men] are really manly and you'd never dream they were queer. Not from the look of them. But I can always tell 'cos they've *all* got LPs of Judy Garland" (11).

[10] Jack Kerouac supplied Burrough's with the title *Naked Lunch* to emphasize how the novel mirrors back society's most vicious behaviors, explaining "the title means exactly

what the words say: Naked Lunch, the frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork" (*Psychedelic*).

[11] Walker notes that in many ancient cultures, the *vagina dentata* was revered, not feared. Such has not been the case, however, since the rise of monotheistic religions that deify the father at the expense of the mother: "The more patriarchal the society, the more fear seems to be aroused by the [*vagina dentata*] fantasy" (1034).

[12] This review incited a flurry of critical letters alternately vilifying the reviewer and praising the novel or exalting the reviewer and reviling the novel. Such viscerally expressed letters appeared weekly for months after the original review, causing one correspondent, noting these letters' frequent use of the word "Ugh," sarcastically to suggest a "a new supplement to be called the 'Ugh supplement'"(qtd. in Goodman 168).

[13] Gove suggests that *City of Night* subliminally complicates Miss Destiny's good girl image by hinting that she is really a "wild restless woman with countless of exhusbands" (qtd. in Gove 66).

[14] Warhol's late sixties superstars would continue this divide between good-girl and bad-girl drag queens. The soft-spoken Candy Darling and Jackie Curtis were good girls, while Holly Woodlawn was relentlessly bad.

[15] D. A. Miller would famously denounce Sontag in 1989 for having enacted a "phobic de-homosexualization of camp as the necessary condition for any intelligent discourse on the subject" (93). As Ross's 1988 essay makes clear, camp had been de-homosexualized long before Sontag took it up.

CHAPTER 3
CUTTING THROUGH NARCISSISM: QUEER VISIBILITY IN *SCORPIO RISING*

In the early 1960s, a group of artists and filmmakers working primarily in New York City began to make and exhibit films that displayed the kind of willful excesses that would later define the decade as a period of cultural and sexual upheaval. For many audiences of the time, these films appeared to uncover previously hidden worlds—underground worlds— whose inhabitants eschewed 1960s American middle-class values. In fact, the makers of these films often encouraged audiences to regard their films as documentaries of subterranean communities. Kenneth Anger, for instance, has stated that his film *Scorpio Rising* (1963) documents the exploits of an actual motorcycle gang from Brooklyn (295). Meanwhile, Andy Warhol has presented his films as the records of real-life people involved in real-life events in real-life places: "I only wanted to find great people and let them be themselves and talk about what they usually talked about and I'd film them for a certain length of time and that would be the movie" (110). Hence, critics and audiences dubbed these films underground films and referred to those who made and appeared in them as denizens of this underground. In actuality, underground films were neither purely documentary nor purely fictional; instead, they borrowed from both approaches. They were fictional in that their makers staged the situations they recorded. Nevertheless, in accordance with their makers' claims, these films were documentary as well: they recorded the spontaneous behaviors of performers who acknowledged both the artificiality of their dramatic situations and the presence of rolling cameras.

The fact that many underground filmmakers belonged to the very sub-cultures that they documented further confounds categories of fiction and documentary. By making films mostly about themselves, their friends, and each other, these filmmakers fostered an underground world whose *raison d'être* was largely their recording of it. Moreover, these filmmakers completed the reflexive loop by showing these films mostly to themselves, their friends and each other. Significantly, many of these underground filmmakers identified as male homosexuals, and their films openly explored male same-sex desire. Thus, these films arguably formed the first cinema made by, for and about male homosexuals. Indeed, several critics have equated the rise of the American underground cinema with the emergence of gay identity.[1] Such a parallel, however, is a bit too neat. Although the two events are linked, the line from underground cinema to gay identity is, as one might imagine, far from straight. Rather than instituting the first gay-identified cinema, these films more accurately mark a pioneering moment for queer cinema, in keeping with the more contemporary usage of queer to mean sexualities that resist easy categorization.

Of these avant-garde filmmakers, Kenneth Anger was the most publicly and spectacularly queer. Before Jack Smith unveiled his first flaming creature and before Andy Warhol spied his first male nude superstar, Kenneth Anger's 1947 *Fireworks* was tackling same-sex attraction in relation to sadomasochism, self-loathing, and anonymous sex in pubic toilets. Perhaps Anger's most famous film, however, is his 1963 paean to motorcycles and leather, *Scorpio Rising*. David James notes, "Of all underground films, *Scorpio Rising* secured most notoriety and the widest circulation, and, much more than any other, it became itself a pop a cultural item" (155). Undoubtedly, much of the film's

general appeal lay in its unabashed celebration of American popular culture: Anger's film exults in Top-40 songs, Sunday comic strips, Hollywood B-movies, and clippings from fan magazines, often juxtaposing these elements in startling ways. The film similarly revels in sexual imagery, particularly homosexual imagery. In fact, *Scorpio Rising* joins mass culture and queer desire in a way that opens up a space for considering how strategic appropriations of the former may give shape to the latter. This essay will show how in the early sixties, *Scorpio Rising* inaugurated innovative representations of same-sex desire through its cinematic juxtaposition of such mass-mediated images. Moreover, its montage often playfully foregrounds contradictory conceptions of same-sex desire that continue to influence our thinking about sexuality and identity today. Perhaps the best way to appreciate *Scorpio Rising*'s advances in queer representation is to review the state of homosexual visibility in popular culture upon the film's initial release.

Homosexual Self-Representation

Audiences and critics of the 1960s could not help but notice the decidedly queer imagery that saturated underground films like *Scorpio Rising*. Nonetheless, they generally viewed this imagery with heterosexism and homophobia. In fact, the response of Jonas Mekas, the critic who is most responsible for the success and widespread fame of the underground cinema, proves the point. Here's how Mekas describes these films' depictions of same-sex desire in his 1963 *Village Voice* "Movie Journal" column:

> These movies are illuminating and opening up sensibilities and experiences never before recorded in the American arts; a content which Baudelaire, the Marquis de Sade, and Rimbaud gave to world literature a century ago and which Burroughs gave to American literature three years ago. It is a world of flowers of evil, of illumination, of torn and tortured flesh; a poetry which is at once beautiful and terrible, good and evil, delicate and dirty.

> A thing that may scare an average viewer is that this cinema is treading on the very edge of perversity. These artists are without inhibitions, sexual or any other kind. These are, as Ken Jacobs put it, "dirty mouthed" films. They all contain homosexual and lesbian elements. The homosexuality, because of its existence outside the official moral conventions, has unleashed sensitivities and experiences which have been at the bottom of much great poetry since the beginning of humanity. (*Movie* 85-86)

Here, Mekas rightly connects these films' experimental styles to their then unprecedented displays of queer sexuality. Nevertheless, Mekas misrepresents the innovative familiarity with which these films approach same-sex desire. When Mekas announces that these films are "illuminating and opening up sensibilities and experiences never before recorded in the American arts"(*Movie* 85), his language suggests exotic images of an allegedly scary, aberrant, underground homosexuality. In short, he encourages audiences to view these films from the viewpoint of normative heterosexuality. His advisory obscures the fact that the cast-and-crew audiences attending Mekas's late-night underground film screenings at the Charles Theater (and then the Bleeker Street Cinema, and later the Gramercy Arts Theater) were largely homosexual and probably found many of these images more amusing than disturbing.

With some qualifications, Mekas is nevertheless right to describe these films as rare glimpses into queer sub-cultures. His uncritical invocations of Baudelaire, the Marquis de Sade, Rimbaud, and Genet's "world of flowers of evil" (*Movie* 85), however, suggest that these films attest to a homosexual demimonde that is somehow trans-historical and monolithic. Meanwhile, the films themselves, most particularly *Scorpio Rising*, reveal something else entirely. They show homosexuality located in a contested epistemological space at a very specific moment in time. In fact, they appear to meet several of the criteria for what the anthropologist George Marcus has termed modern

ethnography. Marcus distinguishes modern ethnography from traditional ethnography by emphasizing how the former complicates, and often undermines, the distant observing gaze to which the latter aspires (42). By recognizing the similarities between those who study and those who are studied, Marcus proposes a reflexive ethnography that imagines its subjects and objects as equal partners in the existential project of constituting identity (43). In addition, Marcus explains that modern ethnography can break "with the trope of a settled community in realist ethnography" (43) in order to recognize cultures that claim no geographic territories. Thus, according to Marcus's definition, underground film's exploration of free-floating homosexual worlds easily qualifies as ethnographic work. Through these films, a group of homosexual men in New York in the 1960s were able to confront the problem of constituting identity by acting this process out for themselves on screen.

Moreover, underground film's displays of homosexuality and Marcus's modern ethnography likewise share a common dilemma: how does one use a representational system to express ideas that contradict this very system's enabling assumptions? In the case of portraying homosexual desire, the conflict between the intended articulation (same-sex attraction) and the predominant cultural form of expression (heterosexist discourse) is especially strong. While the dominant culture fundamentally defines desire as an attraction between differences, the very etymology of the word "homosexual" proposes an attraction between similarities. This misfit is so disruptive that homosexual desire is often framed through supplementary differences, such as those between class, race, and age. On a very basic level, then, the very term "homosexual desire" appears oxymoronic in a heterosexist culture: how could one have desire without difference?

Because of this seeming conceptual conflict with the dominant language, same-sex desire only attained what little visibility it did in the first half of the twentieth century through indirect, and therefore ambiguous, metaphors. For instance, gay film historian Vitto Russo proposes that classic Hollywood cinema of the twenties, thirties, and forties predominantly depicted male homosexuality through gender inversion. In these films, homosexuals appeared as sissies, often narratively deployed as a supercilious fools and the butts of jokes. But, Russo notes, because Hollywood avoided overt references to homosexuality, these recurring sissies could easily pass as overly fussy heterosexual men. Russo's point is that this representational strategy was so tenuous, so prone to foundering that it was tantamount to invisibility.

In the fifties and sixties, the popular arts began to portray same-sex longing more sensually, and at times more sympathetically, but these images likewise depicted homosexuality through the guise of something else, specifically self-absorption. Gay critic Richard Dyer has written extensively on this representational strategy, which primarily envisions homosexuality through the figure of the inward-turning, sad young man. Dyer's tersely listed evidence of the ubiquity of this self-obsessed figure during the time period is worth quoting in full:

> The stereotype of the sad young man is found in probably all representational media, from novels and 'non-fiction' accounts (e.g. *Man on a Pendulum*, 'a case history of an invert presented by a religious counselor', told in a style broadly indistinguishable from novels like *The Divided Path* or *All the Sad Young Men*) to plays, films, even dance (e.g. *Monument for a Dead Boy*) and song ('Ballad of the Sad Young Men' recorded by Petula Clark and Roberta Flack). It is equally present in high and low culture, from critically acclaimed fiction (James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*) to soft-core pornography (Joe Leon Houston's *Desire in the Shadows* a.k.a. *The Gay Flesh*), and from avant-garde cinema (*Fragment of Seeking*, *Twice a Man*) via porn again (*Pink Narcissus*, *Passing Strangers*) to entertainment movies with 'serious themes' (*Rebel*

> *without a Cause*, *Tea and Sympathy*, *Victim*), though it seems to have remained doggedly middle-brow in the theatre (*The Green Bay Tree*, *The Immoralist*, *The Boys in the Band*). It is an important element in highly public star images such as Montgomery Clift, Sal Mineo, James Dean, Farley Granger and Dirk Bogarde just as in the more restrictedly circulated paintings of Christopher Wood or Cedric Morris. ("Coming Out as Going In" 74-76)

Although Dyer finds this figure everywhere, he stops just short of attributing its prevalence to heterosexist culture's predilection for imagining same-sex desire as a form of narcissism. Nonetheless, the representational strategy of the sad young man depends upon an implied equivalence between the two. In fact, this confusion of homosexuality with narcissism often becomes quite explicit. For instance, throughout a pornographic film from this time period entitled *Pink Narcissus* (1971), a young man initiates intimate relations with a series of men in sequences that the film codes as this young man's fantasies. When the young man finally encounters another man in the movie's real-life sequence, however, this other man turns out to be himself. Here, even a film that anticipates an exclusively male homosexual audience cannot sustain a display of male same-sex desire without collapsing it into a figure of self-absorption. As in the case of the sissy figure, the device that ostensibly gives form to same-sex desire overtakes it. Homosexuality achieves a kind of visibility through images of effeminacy (gender inversion) and exaggerated self-consciousness (narcissism), but it disappears into them as well.[2]

Thus, the underground cinema's aforementioned attempt to self-determine homosexual representations on film was moreover an attempt to create any sustainable depictions of same-sex desire. Paradoxically, it sought to invent such images by relying upon cinematic devices rooted in a culture that imagined same-sex desire through

simplistic correspondences with such things as gender inversion or self-infatuation. Perhaps a good way to frame the difficulty of this aim is to compare it to a similar project almost simultaneously undertaken by the French historian Michel Foucault. In 1961, when the underground cinema was just getting started, Foucault, who, like many of the underground film directors, identified as a male-homosexual, published *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*.[3] Jacques Derrida's 1963 analysis of this book explains Foucault's revolutionary intentions:

> Foucault wanted madness to be the subject of his book in every sense of the word: its theme and its first person narrator, its author, madness speaking about itself. Foucault wanted to write a history of madness *itself*, that is madness speaking on the basis of its own experience and under its own authority, and not a history of madness described from within the language of reason.(34)

Foucault's attempt to grant madness its own liberating voice from within the language of its oppressor (reason) parallels the underground film movement's attempt to give homosexual desire self-expression by drawing on cinematic tropes of the dominant culture (Hollywood).[4]

As much as Derrida applauds Foucault's project, he also explains the obstacles that make it a self-contradictory, and maybe even an impossible, endeavor:

> It is a question, therefore, of escaping the trap or objectivist naiveté that would consist in writing a history of untamed madness, of madness as it carries itself and breathes before being caught and paralyzed in the nets of classical reason, from within the very language of classical reason itself, utilizing the concepts that were the historical instruments of the capture of madness—- the restrained and restraining language of reason. (34)

Here, Derrida complains that Foucault's hope of giving madness the right to determine itself through language ignores the fact that madness is defined by the very fact that it cannot productively engage in language, which is governed by rationality. A similar

impediment stood in the way of the underground filmmakers. Trying to depict homosexual desire through Hollywood tropes without having it collapse into something else, such as gender inversion or narcissism, was as impossible as trying to "write" madness without re-inscribing the dominance of reason. No cinematic tools yet existed to depict more complex understandings of homosexual desire, the kinds of understandings that queers had been and were still in the process of developing for themselves.

Montage, Metaphor and Metonymy

Anger's film met this challenge by altering the already existing cinematic apparatus so that it would serve new representational purposes. He turned to montage. The ideas of anthropologist George Marcus suggest why. Marcus explains how montage enables experimental ethnography to interrupt the assumptions of dominant ethnographic discourse:

> Of a deconstructive bent, [the montage approach of] modernist ethnography counts on not being first, on not discovering. It remakes, re-presents other representations. Experimental ethnography thus depends on preexisting, more conventional narrative treatments and is parasitic of them. Such ethnography is a comment, a remaking of a more standard realist account. (45)

As Marcus indicates, the parasitic nature of montage allows it to make points that are antithetical to the representational system that acts as its host. Thus, montage is able to deconstruct what it cites; it alters language systems as it adopts them. In *Scorpio Rising*, montage specifically "remakes" and "re-presents" heterosexist symbol systems in order to envision sustainable homosexual desire.

Other critics of Anger's *Scorpio Rising* have noted how its montage strategies plunder pre-existing sign systems, but not how fully it subverts them to its queer ends.

For instance, David James highlights the way that *Scorpio Rising* and other films by Anger seem specifically to recall the cinema of classic Hollywood. Writing in the 1980s, James claims, "The structural irony engendered by an independent film practice's reference to its industrial other reaches its apogee in the work of Kenneth Anger" (149). Even though it "proposes itself as the subversive alternative to Hollywood, Anger's cinema is constantly traversed by Hollywood" (James 152). Here, James sees Anger's parodic intentions leading him to reinstate the classic Hollywood style he allegedly mocks. Moreover, Carel Rowe reads *Scorpio Rising* as the recuperation of an even earlier artistic model. Writing in the 1970s, Rowe returns to Mekas's above-quoted statement that the underground cinema returns to "a content which Baudelaire, the Marquis de Sade, and Rimbaud gave to world literature a century ago" (Mekas *Movie* 85). Rowe builds on Mekas's conceit to argue that Anger and the other underground filmmakers revisit six specific characteristics of the French Decadent and Symbolist movements in art and literature: "dissatisfaction with civilization, pessimism, dandyism, sterility, a view of women as the destructive femme fatale, and androgyny" (35).

Although James and Rowe usefully connect Anger's film to Hollywood symbology and French Decadent thematics, *Scorpio Rising* engages the representational devices that it borrows from these systems more fully than even these critics suggest. For example, although Rowe delineates French Decadent and Symbolist themes in Anger's work, even closer attention to Anger's montage reveals how *Scorpio Rising* revives and extends this movement's formal devices as well. In fact, Anger's montage remakes and re-presents Decadent and Symbolist explorations of metaphor in a cinematic context. Rowe, although refraining from such formal analysis, cites a definition of Symbolist

metaphor by Alfred Garwin Engstrom that allows such a cross-comparison between it and Anger's montage:

> Symbolist poetry is a poetry of indirection, in which objects tend to be suggested rather than named [e.g. Paul Verlaine referring to a cloud writes "The black rock"], or to be used primarily for an evocation of mood. Ideas may be important, but are characteristically presented obliquely through a variety of symbols and must be apprehended largely by intuition and feeling. Symbolist poets use words for their magical suggestiveness. (Rowe 30) [5]

Here, Engstrom explains that Symbolist poetry tries to expand the range of language by privileging indirect correspondences, a process which Engstrom links to magical suggestiveness. Already, Anger and the French Symbolists unite in preferring the obscure, sympathetic logic of magic to the logic of reason. Anger, in fact, has throughout his career publicly cited the self-proclaimed magus Aleister Crowley as his model and inspiration; he has even explicitly referred to his own films as incantations. [6]

Still, Anger's cinema intersects with Symbolist poetics at a more specific level. As Engstrom notes, Symbolist metaphor imagines direct substitutions, but it constructs such substitutions obliquely, so that they "tend to be suggested rather than named" (Rowe 30). Thus, in its desire to evoke intuitive rather than rational responses, Symbolist poetry seeks metaphoric exchanges, but it nonetheless interrupts these exchanges with long series of partial, or metonymic, correspondences. In this way, Symbolism blurs the distinctions between metaphor and metonymy. *Scorpio Rising* uses montage to imitate this process. Like Symbolist indirection, it too begins to dissolve the distinction between metaphor and metonymy, and in doing so, begins to reassess the shape of sexual desire.

Roman Jakobson's 1956 essay "The Two Aspects of Language" helps bridge Symbolist poetics and Anger's montage. At around the same time that underground

filmmakers were beginning to re-imagine depictions of homosexual desire, Jakobson's essay was exploring the ways in which metaphor and metonymy differently structure both thought and language. A review of his distinctions between these two modes clarifies the boundaries between these devices, which *Scorpio Rising*, like Symbolism, strategically begins to erode. According to Jakobson, any symbolic process has both metaphoric and metonymic poles. Jakobson defines these poles as operating according to different logics:

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second. (109-110)

To clarify these ideas, Jakobson gives the example of a verbal statement and explains how it conveys meaning along two axes. First, each word, especially each substantive, connects vertically through similarity to other similar but unspoken words from which it has been chosen. According to Jakobson, these correspondences are metaphoric relationships that engender substitutive processes. Secondly, each word of the statement also connects horizontally to the other words in the statement. These horizontal connections arise through a hierarchy of contiguity. They are thus partial correspondences. According to Jakobson, these partial correspondences are metonymic relationships that engender predicative processes.

Although Jakobson's above example only identifies metaphoric and metonymic poles in language, he also sees this "same oscillation [of poles] occur[ing] in sign systems other than language" (111). In fact, just as Mekas and Rowe define the aims of underground film by alluding to late nineteenth century Symbolism, Jakobson explains

how metaphor and metonymy differently affect more complex symbol systems by alluding to more prominent nineteenth century artistic and literary movements, Romanticism and Realism. He designates Romanticism as metaphoric and Realism as metonymic. Jakobson argues that Realism is metonymic because "the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time" (111). In other words, the Realist aesthetic is metonymic because it must construct its symbolic logic detail by detail, contiguity by contiguity, proposition by proposition. Unlike Romantic metaphor that claims connection to already assembled symbolic structures beyond the text, Realist metonymy imbues its imagined realities with symbolic meaning by methodically proposing and constructing partial correspondences within the text.

Jakobson's distinction here and above between substitutive and predicative processes is significant. By ascribing substitutive processes to metaphor and attributing only predicative processes to metonymy, Jakobson is using these terms in a very special way. Because Jakobson deems all substitutive processes as metaphoric, the metaphoric pole marks all of the unspoken contexts of the statement. Meanwhile, because Jakobson defines metonymy as primarily a predicative process, the metonymic pole of language signals only the self-reflexive, propositional aspects of the statement, or how the statement says what it says.

Jakobson's specific definitions of metaphor and metonymy reveal how *Scorpio Rising* makes meaning by traversing these two aspects of language and thought. In fact, Anger's film often mobilizes metaphor and metonymy at cross-purposes in order to unsettle the usual conflation of homosexuality and narcissism. Specifically, the film

presents images that metaphorically signal heterosexual masculinity, but it situates them in a context that metonymically invokes solipsistic desire. For instance, in one notable sequence of the film, several tough-looking young bikers slowly dress for the camera to the accompaniment of Bobby Vinton's rendition of "Blue Velvet" (Figures 3-1 and 3-2). In terms of metaphor, these young men refer to a very specific symbol system that exists beyond the world of the film, the iconography of postwar heterosexual biker culture. This metaphoric correspondence evokes masculine heterosexuality at one of its most aggressive extremes. Nevertheless, the film metonymically constructs the men as narcissists by foregrounding their fussy attention to their appearance. Here, the film metonymically equates heterosexuality and fussy self-consciousness. The equation seems jarring; in fact, it is so unexpected that it operates as a joke, a witty reversal of how we usually define heterosexual desire and over-refined self-consciousness against each other.

Nonetheless, this sequence's vertical montage, its juxtapositions of sound and image, draws on metaphor to correct this joke and return the more familiar conflation of narcissism and male homosexuality. Michael Moon, for example, explains how the music in this sequence metaphorically codes boys as girls: "as Bobby Vinton croons, 'She wore blue velvet,' the film represents not a woman in blue velvet but a bike boy (three of them, in fact) in blue *denim*" (29). Moon then recalls ideas from Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to interpret this mismatch as a joke on gender: "While the song invites its auditor to fantasize a specularized and fetishized girl or woman— [. . .] Anger's film presents specularized and fetishized boys" (29). Moon is right to note how the song's lyrics reverse gender here;

Figure 3-1. Bike boy dressing during "Blue Velvet" sequence in *Scorpio Rising*.

Figure 3-2. Another bike boy dressing during "Blue Velvet" sequence in *Scorpio Rising*.

still, what is most interesting about this sonic gender reversal is the way that it dismantles how this sequence would otherwise equate heterosexual masculinity, rather than homosexuality, to narcissism. The song's lyrics, by apparently referring to each of these bikers with the pronoun "she," insist on these bikers' femininity. It is as if the film's visual connection between heterosexual masculinity and self-obsession are untenable. The song must interrupt this connection by asserting that these men before the camera are not really heterosexual men, but that they are somehow women, or, more precisely, that they are inverts.

Still, this same vertical montage also participates in a sort of meta-metonymy that is at odds with its metaphoric function. The sound track that metaphorically reverses gender by referring to this sequence's bike boys as if they were girls metonymically parallels, and thus emphasizes, the visual reversal that treats heterosexuality as if it were homosexuality. Thus the same vertical montage that draws on metaphor to counteract this sequence's visual metonymy establishes an audiovisual metonymy whose sonic reversals of gender call attention to its visual reversals of sexuality. The aural register's metaphoric equation of inversion and self-directed desire thus indirectly mirrors the visual register's metonymic meshing of heterosexuality and narcissism. As a result, the vertical montage's meta-metonymic register depicts these competing assertions as culturally, and playfully, constructed, rather than disinterestedly discovered. Likewise, the film's humor plays these allegedly pathological models of homosexuality for laughs. It proposes no clear equation between gender, sexuality, and narcissism, and appears to have little interest in doing so. Instead, *Scorpio Rising* revels in complex combinations of all three.

Scorpio Rising's purely visual montage strategies likewise alternate between metaphor and metonymy. One montage unit in particular replaces homosocial idol worship with homosexuality by drawing on the metaphoric principle of montage.[7] Soviet film theorist Sergei Eisenstein describes the metaphoric potential of montage when he writes that "depictable" images can express "undepictable" concepts:

> The point is that the copulation (perhaps we had better say, the combination) of two hieroglyphs of the simplest series is to be regarded not as their sum, but as their product, i.e., as a value of another dimension, another degree; each separately, corresponds to an *object*, to a fact, but their combination corresponds to a *concept*. From separate hieroglyphs has been fused—the ideogram. By the combination of two 'depictables' is achieved the representation of something that is graphically undepictable. (29-30)

In such montage, the conceptual pull between the two images begins to erase their differences, leading the viewer to infer how they metaphorically correspond to express a single concept. *Scorpio Rising* exhibits this metaphoric process in the montage unit that cuts from a shot of the character Scorpio lying on his bed (fig. 3-3) to a shot of the *L'il Abner* comic strip from the Sunday paper that he reads (fig. 3-4). In the first shot, Scorpio, in frame-left, faces to the right. Meanwhile, in this same shot, a pinned-up photo of James Dean, which appears in frame-right, faces to the left. The photo thus mirrors Scorpio's head. In effect, Scorpio simultaneously appears to be meeting the eyes of his idol and the eyes of his own reflection. The second unit of this montage then presents a panel from a *L'il Abner* comic. This panel graphically matches the previous shot. It shows two boys on either side of the frame staring into each other's eyes. Shown apart from its original context, this image of two boys, face to face, locked in a moonlight embrace seems strongly homoerotic. Through the montage of attraction, Scorpio and Dean retroactively seem to reproduce the romantic gaze of the boys in the panel.

Figure 3-3. Scorpio in frame-left mirrors Dean in frame-right in *Scorpio Rising*.

Figure 3-4. Two boys stare into each other's eyes by the light of the moon in the *L'il Abner* panel from *Scorpio Rising*.

Consequently, through metaphoric substitution, idol worship, narcissism, and homosexual desire collapse into each other.

A metonymic interpretation of this same montage, however, questions the way such substitutive processes naturalize these total correspondences. After all, male same-sex idol worship, self-obsession, and homosexual desire, although arguably related, are not identical. Instead, their relationships are partial. Thus, a metonymic approach seeks the predicative logic behind the proposition that equates the three. Rather than reading montage here as a process of direct substitution, a metonymic approach might instead read this latter montage unit as something more complex, such as the conclusion of a syllogism. In such an interpretation, the premises of the syllogism arise in previous montage units.

In fact, a montage unit arrives earlier in this clip that seems to set up both the major and minor premises of the syllogism that the above-discussed montage unit concludes. Moreover, as if to reinforce the idea of syllogistic montage, this earlier montage unit features the same shot of Scorpio facing into the Dean pin-up that figures in the later montage unit. This first montage unit sets up the major premise of the syllogism by inter-cutting the Scorpio-Dean shot (fig. 3-5) with a televised image of Marlon Brando from the 1953 Laslo Benedek film *The Wild One* (fig. 3-6). Here, the montage parallels Scorpio, who lies alone in his bed, and Dean, who mugs for his publicity photo, with Brando, who, by appearing decked out in motorcycle gear, recalls the narcissism of the bike boys from the previously discussed "Blue Velvet" sequence. Thus, this two-shot montage unit establishes a major premise of shared narcissism among Scorpio, Brando and Dean.

Figure 3-5. Scorpio and Dean's head-shot seem to face off in *Scorpio Rising*

Figure 3-6. TV image of Marlin Brando in *The Wild One* from *Scorpio Rising*.

Meanwhile, this same montage unit also uses eye-line matches to propose a minor premise. In the first part of this montage unit (fig. 3-5), Scorpio and Dean appear to face each other off in a two-shot. In the second part of this montage unit, the shot from *The Wild One* (fig. 3-6), Brando leers towards the left of the screen, creating an eye-line match with Scorpio, who, in the preceding two-shot, squints towards frame-right. This minor premise sets up a system of scrutinizing glares among these supposed narcissists. The concluding montage between the Scorpio-Dean shot (fig.3-5) and the *L'il Abner* panel (fig. 3-4) then caps off both the major and minor premises of the syllogism with an assertion of homosexuality.

Although both the metaphoric and metonymic readings of this concluding montage unit assert a conceptual slippage among male same-sex idol worship, self-directed desire and homosexuality, the metonymic critique begins to analyze the logic that structures such a slippage. Most importantly, it dissects the cultural conflation of homosexuality and self-absorption rather than merely reproducing it. Like Symbolist poetics, Anger's montage here may imply an overriding metaphoric correspondence, but it more productively charts partial correspondences that metonymically fragment the metaphor that they comprise. For instance, the above montage at times proposes homosexuality as intensified masculine gender performance. Then again, it constructs same-sex desire as a circuit that moves from self-comparisons with other men to acquiring gazes of other men. Anger's film may still link homosexuality and solipsistic desires, but it visually opens up complex conceptual routes between the two. It creates a cinematic space in which queer desire appears as something much more complicated and

deeply embedded in popular consciousness than its common appearance through such simplistic tropes as gender inversion or narcissistic fixation would suggest.

Homosexual Poetics and Rhetoric

Scorpio Rising likewise initiates other means of envisioning homosexuality by reviving French Symbolism's preference for over-developing the vehicles of its metaphors. This poetic treatment of metaphor differs in both process and aim from Symbolist indirection. Engstrom, for instance, above suggests how Symbolist indirection inserts partial correspondences within the substitutive link between a metaphor's tenor (or subject) and its carrier (or object). Indirection thus partitions substitution to integrate metaphor and metonymy. Bernard Dupriez, however, explains that this other Symbolist metaphor differentiates itself from indirection by stressing direct substitution. Dupriez clarifies this point by citing the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé and analyzing how metaphor operates in one of his poems:

> Mallarmé: "I am crossing the word *like* out of the dictionary." In other words, "I prefer metaphor to simile." He tried to go even further, reducing the tenor almost to nothing, even trying to suppress it altogether. For instance, in "Brise Marine," *birds*, *drunk*, *foam*, *skies*, *seas*, *steamer*, *masts*, *anchor*, *storms*, *shipwrecks*, and *fertile islands* all belong to the phore; only a few words—*books*, *heart*, and *empty paper*—refer to the theme. There is no sign to mark the analogy, and most of the elements in the vehicle have no particular link with the tenor. (277)

While indirection hinders substitution by intervening in the actual metaphoric exchange, Mallarmé's metaphor emphasizes direct substitution by counterbalancing either side of the metaphoric equation. Thus, when its description of the carrier swells, its statement of the tenor shrinks in equal proportion.

Nonetheless, Dupriez's example also reveals how this same device overburdens and thus erodes the metaphoric procedure that it exploits. Mallarmé's "Brise Marine," for example, reinforces metaphoric substitution by elaborately describing its controlling metaphor's carrier with the aim of better evoking its absent tenor. Still, the poem's central metaphor collapses under this excessive attention to the vehicle. As Dupriez states, "There is no sign to mark the analogy, and most of the elements in the vehicle have no particular link with the tenor (277). Ironically, this metaphor's fracture leaves metonymy in the foreground by default. For instance, continuing with the example of "Brise Marine," only the contiguous relations among *birds*, *drunk*, *foam*, *skies*, *seas*, *steamer*, *masts*, *anchor*, *storms*, *shipwrecks*, and *fertile islands* will yield this metaphor's missing tenor. Thus, the original substitution reveals itself only through the metonymies of the protracted vehicle.

Anger's film similarly embellishes the carrier of its own central metaphor. Specifically, *Scorpio Rising* overall proposes a metaphoric substitution between homosocial gang relations, its metaphor's vehicle, and homosexuality, its metaphor's theme. At times, this correspondence is direct. For example, during the aforementioned "Blue Velvet" sequence, the elaborate costuming rituals of the motorcycle gang convey ideas about homosexuality: although these bikers relate to each other only homosocially in the film, each one nonetheless defines queerness as he primps and poses to Bobby Vinton's adoring male voice. Thus, this metaphor's presumably heterosexual vehicle directly comments upon its tenor, homosexual definition. Still, at other times in the film, such correspondence falters. For instance, just as Mallarmé's metaphor inflates its phore

to deepen the complexity of its theme, *Scorpio Rising* intensifies its depictions of motorcycle culture in order to complicate its conception of homosexuality. As in Mallarmé's poem, however, this strain on the metaphor's vehicle causes the controlling metaphor to break down. For example, in *Scorpio Rising*, representations of motorcyclists increase out of proportion with their homosexual tenor until the metaphoric relations between carrier and tenor collapse. When this happens, the over-extended vehicle's components break off into cinematic facsimiles of other poetic devices. Even though this fracturing disrupts the film's overarching metaphoric strategies, some of the resulting cine-literary devices nonetheless continue to explore potential means for portraying homosexuality.

Two such breakaway devices, for instance, emerge from the way that Anger's film weaves in found imagery from *The Wild One*. For example, as *Scorpio Rising*'s controlling metaphor founders, the inserted shots of Marlon Brando as *The Wild One*'s conflicted motorcycle gang leader begin to resemble a cinematic version of literary prosopopoeia. Dupreiz defines prosopopoeia as the "presentation of absent, dead, or supernatural beings, or even inanimate objects, with the ability to act, speak, and respond" (357).[8] Brando appears in *Scorpio Rising* as such an absence made present. In fact, as James might argue, Brando's figure here summons the institution of Hollywood cinema, against which Anger defines his filmmaking style. If Brando's figure merely appeared here statically as an index of Hollywood, however, his presence would be only an instance of signification. What instead renders Brando's presence as an instance of prosopopoeia is the way that he appears to interact with the other characters in Anger's film, even though he belongs to a different diegesis. In fact, as detailed above, both

Brando and the James Dean photo seem to exchange sexualized glances with Scorpio. Thus, as prosopopoetic figures, both the shots of Brando and the pin-up of Dean help define the same-sex desire that they invoke. Indeed, they begin to articulate homosexuality as an extension of Hollywood's models of masculinity.

Scorpio Rising's borrowed imagery from *The Wild One* also mobilizes the cinematic manifestation of another poetic device, homonymy. Dupreiz defines homonymy as "single words for different things" (133). *Scorpio Rising* visually imitates homonymy by modifying *The Wild One*'s bike gang imagery so that it simultaneously conveys two distinct meanings, homosocial bonding and homosexual desire. For instance, the "Party Lights" and "Torture" sequences of Anger's film mirror the rowdy scenes of bikers invading the soda shop from *The Wild One.* In both, men roughhouse in otherwise domestic environments, which they then overtake by infusing these spaces with chrome, leather, and motors. Similarly, both *The Wild One* and Anger's sequences center on two kinds of male-male physical interaction, fighting-for-show and mock-intimacy. Nonetheless, *The Wild One* carefully maintains a heterosexual coding of its bikers in these scenes by including women for the bikers to ogle, admire and generally harass. Anger's film, in contrast, keeps the focus on the men. In fact, even though Anger readily states that the actors in the biker party sequences all had "girlfriends [who] were present during nearly all of the filming" (Landis 111), his framing carefully excludes them. Thus, when Anger's bikers horse around with a dildo, display their buttocks for the camera, or pounce on each other's backs, their images signify homonymically; while their careless camaraderie conveys homosocial bonding, their sexual play simultaneously seems homosexual.

In fact, as these last two figures, as well as *Scorpio Rising's* previously discussed montage strategies demonstrate, Anger's film throughout describes and articulates homosexuality through the language of exaggerated homosociality. Much as Marcus's modern ethnography redirects anthropological language against its assumptions, Anger's film directs its images of male bonding and macho posturing towards their charged boundaries with homosexuality and narcissism. By playfully mocking these boundaries, and at times crossing back and forth between them, *Scorpio Rising*'s montage calls attention to what queer theorist Lee Edelman has called homographesis. Edelman explains his theoretical term:

> [H]omographesis (in its first, identity-producing sense) can be unpacked as a compulsory marking or cultural articulation of homosexual legibility that proceeds from a concern that the homosexual might be inscribed, as I would put it, in the purview of the homograph. As an explicitly graphemic structure, the homograph provides a useful point of reference for the consideration of a gay graphesis. A homograph, after all, refers to a "word of the same written form as another but of different origin and meaning"; it posits, therefore, the necessity of reading difference within graphemes that appear to be the same. (12-13)

Here, Edelman describes homographesis as a cultural process that inscribes otherwise identical male bodies as either homosexual or heterosexual without recourse to showing these bodies actively engaged in explicit sexual activity. When Anger's film recodes macho posturing, a common marker of heterosexuality, as homoerotic narcissism, he begins to unravel the dominant culture's homographesis. He subverts the metaphorical distinction between homosexual and heterosexual bodies by attaching a common marker of heterosexuality to a body expressing homosexual desire.

Anger's film, however, innovates at a cost. Its representational strategy relies on a contradiction, which Edelman's comments above both share and reveal. Edelman, for

instance, proposes a second point. He claims that homosexual subjects and heterosexual subjects are essentially homographic, that without homographesis, they are indistinguishable from each other. Edelman's implied claim here is deeply paradoxical: his language both asserts and denies the existence of distinct sexual identities prior to representation. Anger's film also partakes of this apparent inconsistency. It corrects a previous fallacy, the conflation of homosexuality and narcissism, but it entertains a new one, the conflation of homosexuality and homosociality. The film presents homosexual self-representations that differ from those authored by the status quo culture, but even as it asserts this difference, it displays a kind of sameness. Its representational counter-strategy continues the tradition of depicting homosexual desire in terms of something else, here familiar images of exaggerated homosociality.

Anger's paradoxical achievement, however, is no failure. Instead, it is strategic. After all, it is through this ability to relay such contradictions that Anger's film crosses the line from art into document, from poetics into rhetoric. It weds paradoxical representational strategies to jump-start a conceptual shift in thinking about queer desire. Here, *Scorpio Rising* once again intersects with Foucault's ideas about conceptual representation. French philosopher and literary critic Gilles Deleuze explains Foucault's belief that pursuing paradoxes can produce historical shifts in thought, which he terms *statements*:

> Statements are not words, phrases or propositions, but rather formations thrown up by the corpus in question only when the subjects of the phrase, the objects of the proposition and the *signifieds* of words *change in nature*; they then occupy the place of the "One speaks" and become dispersed throughout the opacity of language. This is the constant paradox in Foucault: the language coagulates around a corpus only in order to facilitate the distribution or dispersion of statements and to stand as the rule for a "family" that is naturally dispersed. (18)

Anger's film articulates such a statement. It thoroughly alters the subjects, the objects and the signifieds of both homosexuality and homosociality. It reapportions the meanings of its borrowed signs and overturns simplistic devices for depicting same-sex attraction in order to render queer desire as something more complex than it previously appeared to be. By reassembling signs from 1960s popular culture to embody this conceptual shift, *Scorpio Rising* not only documents this period's radical reevaluation of homosexuality, but it simultaneously participates in it. It also displays how subverting common tropes for depicting gender and sexuality can open up a space for rethinking the complex connections among popular culture, queer culture, sexuality, and identity, a project whose liberatory potential remains as important now as it ever was.

Notes

[1] For instance, see Waugh 67-73, Suárez 260-262, Finch 112-117, and Dyer's *Now You See It* 102-173.

[2] Jeff Nunokawa traces the sad young man figure back to what he terms the "lethal characterization" (313) of homosexuality in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Here, as in later representations, the sad young man's descent into himself leads to his doom. *Scorpio Rising's* plot replays the bare bones of this scenario, but Scorpio's descent into himself becomes a plunge into popular culture's obsession with death, not the traditional sad young man's quiet withdrawal from existence.

[3] Four years later, Foucault's abridged English language version of this text appeared under the title *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*.

[4] In fact, the two connect more than many modern readers might at first suspect. Until 1973, the American Psychiatric Association still regarded homosexual desire as a mental disease. According to such arbiters of reason, same-sex desire, like madness, made no sense and thus had no authority to speak on its own behalf.

[5] Here Rowe cites Alfred Garwin Engstrom's entry on "Symbolism," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1974.

[6] Anger's interest in Crowley and the occult cannot be overstated. For more on this see Landis 26-34 and 68-81.

[7] I draw the term "homosocial" from Eve Sedgwick, who defines it best: "'Homosocial' is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual.' In fact, it is applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear, and hatred of homosexuality"(*Between* 1).

[8] Here, Dupriez cites page 404 of Fontanier, Pierre. *Les Figures du discours.* 1821-1830. Paris: Flammarion, 1968.

CHAPTER 4
FLAMING CREATURES: JACK SMITH'S QUEER WORLD MAKING

In 1963, over the course of several weekends, the avant-garde filmmaker Jack Smith gathered a group of his friends on the roof of the closed down Windsor Theater on Grand Street in New York City and shot the footage that would later make up his film *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Smith's friends played the film's "creatures," a collection of especially glamorous women and drag queens dressed to resemble grotesque versions of Hollywood starlets. Several of these performers, most notably Beverly Grant, Francis Francine, Joel Markman and Mario Montez, were experts in outrageous public display who had previously worked with Smith in several off-off-Broadway Theater of the Ridiculous productions (Rowe 48). Throughout the film, these men and women parade before the camera, conspicuously apply make-up, occasionally expose their genitalia in brief flashes, and gather together in loose orgiastic huddles, which alternately stand apart from and recede into the decrepit arabesques of the film's *mise-en-scène*.

With this film, Jack Smith joined Kenneth Anger and Andy Warhol in pioneering what my last chapter has described as the first "out" queer cinema, a collection of underground films that experimented with different strategies for depicting queer desire. *Flaming Creature's* specific contribution to this project is its sexualized re-enactment of Hollywood kitsch. Smith's film subversively revives Hollywood's cast-off splendor in a simultaneously degraded and mythic register. By appropriating, perverting, and then exalting some of Hollywood's most banal fantasies in scenes of orgiastic exploration,

Smith's film, like much of his later performance art, transforms cultural detritus into a generative symbology. In an artistic move that approaches a sweeping transvaluation of twentieth-century culture, Smith's *Flaming Creatures* turns Hollywood trash into tools for re-envisioning the body and sexual selfhood.

Flaming Forefather

Smith's apparent forefather in this endeavor was not, as one might expect, a famously-gay, twentieth-century, avant-garde figure like Jean Cocteau or Jean Genet; instead, Smith's work builds on the surrealist strategies of the twentieth-century American avant-garde artist Joseph Cornell. Cornell is most famous for his artistic assemblages, or "boxes," which he produced from the 1930s until his death in 1972. Jodi Hauptman describes how Cornell's work, most of which predates Smith's film, reprocesses Hollywood fantasy:

> Abandoning traditional modes of portrayal, Cornell adapts the skills of the archivist, collecting a wide range of materials— prints, photographs, newspaper accounts, memorabilia, legends— about, related to, or inspired by his subjects and places these discoveries into scrapbooklike journey albums, archivelike filing systems, miniature museums, and ephemera-filled box-constructions. As repositories of things and events, Cornell's portraits are built to "transcend . . . the dust heap & ruthlessness of time." On this count, the artist considers his portraits homages, meant to honor, memorialize, and, in some cases, rescue his subjects. In emphasizing commemoration, memory, and preservation these works expand the boundaries of portraiture; rather than categorizing them as "portraits," they are better termed "portrait-homages," with each work leaning toward one side (or the other) of the equation. (3)

Cornell's boxes and Smith's film share more than an apparent reverence for Hollywood. By appropriating and remobilizing the imagery that they retrieve from Hollywood's trash-bin, both also intentionally confuse the traditional separation between cultural producers and cultural recipients. Moreover, both recuperate representations of

Hollywood's forgotten stars. Michael Moon notes that Cornell made boxes and collages that resuscitated recently discarded "starlets of the forties, fifties, and sixties, from Hedy Lamarr and Lauren Bacall to Marilyn Monroe, Joan Collins, Yvette Mimieux, and Sheree North (an early "Marilyn clone")" (141). Moon goes on to specify that "[m]any entries in his diary make clear that Cornell did not consider his imaginative engagements with the reigning pop divas of the day a trivial matter or a form of imaginary slumming" (141). Cornell was truly smitten with these women. Smith, meanwhile, openly discussed his method of mining Hollywood for star images that it would rather forget. In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Smith explains that *Flaming Creatures* takes "place in a haunted movie studio. That's why those people were coming and going like that." (Sargeant 101). When asked if Hollywood was really all that he had on his mind when making the film, Smith affirms "Of course. My mind was filled with it . . .Everybody is filled with Hollywood" (Smith and Lotringer 248).

Smith and Cornell not only shared a genuine fondness for all abandoned movie stars, but both harbored obsessions with particular favorites. For both, their obsessions inspired them to make their most famous films. In 1936, Cornell acquired a tossed-away print of *East of Borneo* (George Melford 1931), a failed star-vehicle for a forgotten actress named Rose Hobart. Driven by his fascination with the film's actress, Cornell re-edited the film and replaced its sound track with a loop of Brazilian music. The resulting film, *Rose Hobart*, pares the film down so that, except for a few strategic cut-aways, only those scenes featuring Rose Hobart remain. Cornell's film jettisons sound, characters, and plot to present a twenty-four minute cinematic homage to a woman who may have failed as an actress, but who nonetheless succeeds as a powerful screen presence.

Cornell's film was rarely shown until the late sixties, owing to its poor initial reception.[1] Jack Smith, however, did in fact see it before making his own films. In fact, Jack Smith's performative approach to filmmaking in the sixties, as innovative as it was, very much emerged from a cross-fertilization of theater, dance and the visual arts that was indigenous to New York City's fifties art culture. As Sheldon Renan explains "Smith came to New York in 1950 and began hanging around theatre groups. He studied dancing with Ruth St. Denis and later direction with Lee Strasberg. . . . He then acted in the films of Ken Jacobs and others, and once put on with Jacobs a nightclub show in Provincetown" (181). Edward Leffingwell further situates Smith in a 1950s underground film milieu by describing his fifties collaborations with other New York filmmakers: "In 1956, [Smith] met the aspiring underground filmmakers Bob Fleishner and Ken Jacobs while attending [filmmaking] classes at City College of New York. . . . As a principal actor and sometime talent scout, Smith participated in films Fleischner and Jacobs were making and, later on, those of Ron Rice" (71). Leffingwell notes that *Flaming Creatures*' stylistic flourishes, especially its dilapidated *mise-en-scène*, owes much to the "considerable wit, improvisational nature, urban ruin locations, posturing, and defiance of conventional standards" celebrated by these other filmmakers in their earlier films (71).

According to P. Adams Sitney, Smith not only saw Cornell's *Rose Hobart* during these formative years in his filmmaking career: he studied it. As it turns out, Ken Jacobs acted as an ad hoc artistic assistant to Joseph Cornell during this period. At one point, Cornell gave Jacobs a print of the film to watch at his leisure. Jacobs screened this print numerous times for himself and Smith. His comments to P. Adams Sitney testify to the enormous artistic impact that Cornell's film had upon both him and Smith:

> I was seeing Jack again and I told him, "Jack, you've got to see this movie." We looked at it again and again, and we were both knocked out. Jack tried to act at first like a little bit removed, like I was overstating it, and then he broke down and said, "No, it's very good." We looked at it in every possible way: on the ceiling, in mirrors, bouncing it all over the room, in corners, in focus, out of focus, with a blue filter that Cornell had given me, without it, backwards. It was just like an eruption of energy . . .. (*Visionary* 349).

For Sitney, Jacobs' comments prove the long-reaching structural influence of Cornell's film. As Sitney notes, it is probably the first, but hardly the last, avant-garde film to transform "an old Hollywood film into a modernist work" (*Visionary* 349).

Cornell's influence upon Smith, however, seems even more thoroughgoing. Smith not only recuperates old Hollywood iconography, but he also takes up Cornell's project of emphasizing the transformative power of a singular screen persona by removing those constraints put upon her by the film's narrative apparatus. Just as Cornell's film celebrates the forgotten Rose Hobart, Smith's work expresses his devotion to Maria Montez, a B-movie goddess from the 1940s. During her short-lived career, Montez appeared in such Saturday-matinee fare as *Arabian Nights* (John Rawlins 1942), *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves* (Arthur Lubin 1944), and *Cobra Woman* (Robert Siodmark 1944). Smith publicly idolized Maria Montez and published several articles about her in *Film Journal*, the literary organ of the sixties underground film movement. In one of these articles, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," Smith distinguishes the power of Montez's spectacular presence from her dismal acting: "The vast machinery of a movie company worked overtime to make her visions into sets. They achieved only inept approximations. But one of her atrocious acting sighs suffused a thousand tons of dead plaster with imaginative life and truth" (28).

Flaming Creatures revives what Smith calls Montez's "vision" by crafting its *mise-en-scène* from the detritus of her movie career. The film not only imitates the quasi-Arabian sets of Montez's films, but it also emphasizes Maria Montez as the source of this scenario by featuring Mario Montez, a drag queen fashioned after Maria Montez, in many of the film's pivotal scenes. At times Mario Montez comes to the foreground, while at others Smith practically buries Montez in the film's decrepit scenery, as if the two were inseparable. Here, Smith's *mise-en-scène* fleshes out his own identification with Montez. Although Smith draws on reenactment and expressionistic set design rather than re-editing techniques, his film's attempt to convey his vision of Maria Montez explicitly echoes Cornell's strategy of turning *East of Borneo* into an extension of his fascination with Rose Hobart.

Rose Hobart and *Flaming Creatures* both dismantle the Hollywood apparatus to reinvest Hollywood imagery with a greater sense of erotic mystery. Both also reveal artifice to heighten pleasure. These filmmakers' approaches to visual-erotic pleasure, however, radically differ. Cornell's imagery focuses ever more particularly on Hobart's body and gestures. In fact, Cornell even repeats specific shots of Hobart throughout his film. *Rose Hobart's* erotic exploration of the cinematic image thus operates according to a process of abjection. Cornell separates the footage from *East of Borneo* into two categories, trash and treasure. The abjected trash bin of plot-related material is jettisoned, while the remaining cinematic treasure of Hobart's body is exalted. The resulting film thus exudes a sort of purist aesthetic: Cornell cinematically streamlines Hobart's appeal to a single set of gestures, which by extension suggests a sort of sculpting and defining of visual-erotic pleasure.

Smith's approach, in contrast, refuses to discriminate between trash and treasure in the films of Maria Montez. His reworking of these films thus celebrates a much more inclusive understanding of visual-erotic pleasure than does Cornell's *Rose Hobart*. *Flaming Creatures* eroticizes women, men-dressed-as-women, men-dressed-as-men, and all of their various physical combinations. In addition, as Smith's camera weaves through his creatures' orgies, it is often impossible to differentiate body parts, much less the owners of these parts. Smith, like Cornell, salvages old Hollywood glamour from the plots and devices that constrain it. But while Cornell re-narrativizes these images into a sharply defined economy of desire, Smith denarrativizes desire itself. Cornell's Hollywood reclamation centers on a particular actress (Hobart) and intensifies her embodiment of erotic appeal; Smith's reclamation oppositely spills out from a particular actress (Montez) and unleashes a panoply of unstable, but effusive, erotic signifiers. Cornell brings erotic elements into sharp focus, while Smith blurs distinctions between erotic and non-erotic elements.

Despite the explicit framing and varied approaches to erotic content in Cornell's and Smith's works, critics have often similarly regarded both as somehow sexually immature or naïve. Michael Moon, for instance, cites Mary Ann Caws giving voice to one of the most common hetero-normative dismissals of Cornell's work, that it is a failed approximation of mature sexuality: "Many of his boxes were made for the starlets and models whose charms he sought to salute and capture— as if imprisoning them in boxes were his sole way of partaking of the experience he was never to have" (142). Moon dubs Caws' response to Cornell the "repressive hypothesis," echoing Foucault's term for the twentieth-century received wisdom that imagined the explosion of nineteenth-century

sexual discourses to be their opposite, i.e. their repression. According to Moon, "Bodies and bodily desire have tended to get ignored in the reception of Cornell's work not because of their alleged absence . . . [but] because there are 'too many bodies' and bodily desires circulating in his work for the comfort of many critics" (135). Moon suggests that, rather than imprisoning women as objects, Cornell's work produces a "virtual space in which women performers and their admirers can fantasmatically interact in a public sphere that is otherwise accessible to a relative few" (154). This space is not a substitute for sexuality, but its own form of sexuality, a queer sexuality. In fact, Moon concludes that the presence of this queer and feminized version of sexuality "goes a considerable way in helping us understand why there has been so much resistance to recognizing the complex eroticism of Cornell's boxes" (154).

The erotic images in Smith's films have encountered similar critical resistance. When the police seized and censored *Flaming Creatures* during their campaign to clean up New York City for the 1964 World's Fair, a host of downtown intellectuals encouraged those who would defend freedom-of-expression to take the film up as a cause célèbre. The film's defenders, however, were quick to gloss any serious challenge that the film's erotic imagery posed to sexual politics. *Flaming Creatures* most famous apologist, Susan Sontag, refused even to admit that such a thing as sexual politics existed. In her 1964 review of the film in *The Nation*, she writes, "I'm not denying that there are certain events about which it is necessary to take a position. . . . All I'm saying is there are some elements of life— above all, sexual pleasure— about which it isn't necessary to have a position" (229). Obviously, such a blanket refusal of sexual politics seems hopelessly dated today, after the Stonewall riots in 1969 and all of the various sexually

inflected political movements that have spun-out from it. Nevertheless, Sontag's characterization of *Flaming Creatures* as being sexually unsophisticated has stuck. In the same article, Sontag drains the film's sexual imagery of any conceptual weight by claiming that its "images of sex are alternately childlike and witty" (227). Perhaps more damning, she posits the film's visual complexity as proof of its conceptual simplicity, as if some unspoken law of aesthetics demanded that the two must certainly share an inverse relationship. Sontag holds the film out as a paragon of unthinking art as she writes, "It is not in the knowing about, or being able to interpret, what one sees, that the pleasure of *Flaming Creatures* lies; but in the directness, the power, and the lavish quantity of the images themselves" (229). In the seventies, P. Adams Sitney would echo Sontag's portrait of the film as unknowing, childlike and simple. His criticism would emphasize the "myth of recovered innocence in *Flaming Creatures*, where the triumph may be ironic, but it is not at all problematic" (*Visionary* 357).

Later in his career, Smith would often complain that such critics misrepresented his film, offering it up in reduced form as "a sex issue for the cocktail world" ("Pink" 69). Smith's 1962 *Film Culture* article on Maria Montez appears to foresee the patronizing critical reception his lush images would receive: "Film critics are writers and they are hostile and uneasy in the presence of a visual phenomenon. They are most delighted by bare images that through visual barrenness call thought into play to fill the gap" ("Perfect" 29). Later in this same article, Smith even appears to anticipate the condescending way that Sontag and Sitney would portray his sexual imagery as childlike and simple: "A spectacular, flaming image— since it threatens their critichood need to be able to write— is bad and they attack it throwing in moral extensions and hinting at

idiocy in whoever is capable of visually appreciating a visual medium" ("Perfect" 29). Although Sontag and Sitney exalt *Flaming Creatures'* risky aesthetic and powerful imagery, they often minimize its conceptual worth in the process.

Much of the critical reluctance to attribute intelligence to either Cornell's or Smith's work may be a predictable reaction to the way that both of their aesthetics happily, and often sentimentally, glorify popular ephemera. Both artists grounded their artistic explorations in Hollywood product, which to this day cultural avatars equate with vulgarity. Moreover, neither reached far enough back into Hollywood's past to redeem this recovered imagery with the patina of history. Smith referred to his refusal to discriminate against such artistic elements as the ""moldy" aesthetic. "Moldy" things, he announced, "are imperfect and ugly and this is very rich material to work with, especially the artifacts of the recent past. I am an antiquarian anyway. I like artifacts, moldy things"(Malanga 16). The fact that Cornell and Smith playfully delighted in Hollywood's rejects could still at least earn them irony IQ points in the eyes of our current postmodern culture. Both, however, also flout ironic, intellectual detachment by investing their recovered rejects with emotional value. Moon, for instance, tells how Cornell treated one of his artistic objects as a subject when he sent Sheree North, a failed fifties-starlet whom he featured in one of his boxes, another of his boxes in an attempt to strike up a personal correspondence with her (141). Moon further suggests that the public and critics alike have continued to treat Cornell's sentimentality as an open secret. They surreptitiously enjoy the way his recuperation of recently discarded Hollywood imagery intimates "concern with lost or forgotten childhood or children, with the pastimes of other days, with unrequited love, with the fleetingness of youthful beauty and

of life itself," but they refuse to acknowledge it (149). While Cornell admitted to his sentimental attachment to starlets mostly in his diaries, Smith publicly and often expressed his intense devotion to Maria Montez and her films, which he referred to as the 'secret flix" of his childhood. One of the most striking anecdotes comes from John Zorn; "I remember we went to see a movie at Theater 80, St. Marks— Maria Montez of course. And he was crying during the movie. I'll never forget that. It was so amazing, He had his little handkerchief up, and he was crying" (77). Here Smith's response to one of his secret flix, like Cornell's obsessions with his starlets, is about as far from detachment and irony as one can get.

Instead, Cornell's and Smith's personal and artistic responses to their respective Hollywood movie queens are camp, in the sense that gay-identified critics in the eighties and nineties came to define this term against the more ubiquitous irony, with which camp has often been confused.[2] As Richard Dyer explains, camp combines 'a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity" (*Heavenly* 154), while irony merely emphasizes something's absurdity. These two attitudes produce dramatically different effects. Nayland Blake points out that "irony, requiring no work, never presents a challenge to its practitioner" (180). Meanwhile, "to practice camp, one must be in earnest . . . [Camp is] play conducted with steely determination" (Blake 182). Irony, because it stops short of offering up a challenge, is on some level always complicit with the status quo. In contrast, camp resolutely refuses the dominant culture's sense of value. It "is an attitude of profound seriousness and connoisseurship directed at an inappropriate subject. . . . True camp, unlike irony, is not waiting to tear aside the mask and agree that we are all on the same side" (Blake 180-181). Instead, camp, by finding value in

society's rejects, presents an affront to the status quo. By ignoring the usual notions of worth, camp defies the dominant culture: in fact, it often goes beyond defiance and proposes alternatives.

Herein lies Joseph Cornell's greatest legacy to Jack Smith. Cornell discerned art and beauty in a pile of footage that he redeemed from a rubble heap (Solomon 85). His film *Rose Hobart* communicates a reverence for the rejected, and, in so doing, implicitly critiques how our culture attributes worth. This message no doubt resonated with Jack Smith, who embraced rejection and held success in contempt.[3] Cornell's film shows that the transvaluation of trash holds revolutionary potential. Smith's work would take up this project and escalate it. For Smith, new realities lay dormant in the world's trifles, just waiting to be released.

Fetishism and Body Making

Smith's camp valuation of trifles as potentially world-changing objects draws on a rich history of cultural contests that have been waged over the meanings of trifles. It also demonstrates how camp strategies have their roots in Western fetish theory. Anthropologist William Pietz traces the figure of the trifle back to the first contact between fifteenth century Portuguese traders and sub-Saharan African cultures. As Pietz explains, the trifle was "[t]he key notion that was elaborated to explain perceived African confusion regarding the religious and economic value of material objects" ("Fetish II" 41). For Europeans, their ability to trade trifling objects for gold emblematized the issue of the two cultures' vastly different value systems. Eventually, the trifle would exacerbate these cultural differences into open (not to mention bloody) conflict. As Pietz explains, "While it was precisely such 'false' estimation of the value of things that

provided the desired huge profit rates of early European traders, it also evoked [European] contempt for people who valued 'trifles' and 'trash'" ("Fetish II" 41). As the contempt escalated, so did European attention to these trifling objects. The Europeans began calling these "falsely" valued items "fetishes," a word whose etymological roots in witchcraft and idol worship only further increased their disdain for these objects as being potentially polluting. [4]

According to Pietz, the term "fetish' has since circulated in Western cultures to designate "the incomprehensible mystery of the power of material things to be collective social objects experienced by individuals as truly embodying determinate values" ("Fetish I" 14). Pietz notes that Marxism emphasizes the fetish's social aspect by using the term to describe how "historical institution[s] fix personal consciousness in an objective illusion" ("Fetish I" 9). Meanwhile, psychology and psychoanalysis stress the personal nature of the fetish by using "fetishistic fixation' to explain "the power of a singular personal event [especially a traumatic one] to structure desire" ("Fetish I" 9). Camp folds these divergent understandings of the fetish as marking either personally or socially constructed value back into one another. For instance, Richard Dyer argues that gay audiences who read Judy Garland's early MGM films as melancholic discourses on ordinariness do not infuse these films with meanings that they never contained. Instead, these readers, because of their own personal experiences, seek out and exaggerate the films' kernels of cultural resistance, those brief moments of dissatisfaction with the status quo that these films introduce for purely dramatic purposes. Dyer writes that, despite their happy endings, MGM films "have dusted up a number of problems, contradictions, and misfits, as any entertainment film must do if it is to connect with the lives of its

viewers. What the gay reading-back into the film does is seize on those elements, become more conscious of them" (*Heavenly* 161). Camp's ability to detect and embrace personally significant meanings in a given culture's least-valued objects is where camp resonates most powerfully with fetish theory. Pietz explains that "Fetish discourses always posit [a] double consciousness of ascribed credulity and degraded or distanced incredulity" ("Fetish I" 14). Camp mirrors this double consciousness by personally exalting objects that it simultaneously recognizes as socially debased.

Flaming Creature's camp strategies emphasize such double consciousness by constantly juxtaposing seemingly contradictory viewpoints. As Susan Sontag observes, *Flaming Creatures* "lets in wonderful and new mixtures of attitude, which would have before seemed contradictions. Thus *Flaming Creatures* is a brilliant spoof on sex and at the same time full of lyricism of erotic impulse" (230). Sontag goes on to note that "in a visual sense, too, it's full of contradictions. Very studied visual effects (lacey textures, falling flowers, tableaux) are introduced into disorganized, clearly improvised scenes" (230). Smith's film draws these contradictions together under the figure of Maria Montez. Not only does the film's title sequence feature three-and–a half-minutes of sound taken from the 1944 Montez vehicle *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, but, as J. Hoberman suggests, the entire film is arguably a "radically naturalistic, affectingly impossible evocation of the Montezland scenario" (43). Smith himself declared that Montezland, the milieu of his film, was "created of one woman's belief" and "made manifest on this earth" by Maria Montez (Smith "Perfect" 29). By relying on the figure of Maria Montez to naturalize its paradoxical vision, Smith's film further approximates Western fetish theory. As Pietz explains, the fetish is "a historically singular social

construct able to create the illusion of natural unity among heterogeneous things" ("Fetish I" 9). And its power "is precisely the power to repeat its originating act of forging an identity of articulated relations between [these] things" ("Fetish I" 7-8).

Speculating about how and why Smith chose Montez as his "fetish" helps illuminate the specifically queer power her presence may have exerted over his life and work. Pietz notes that "*any* trifling object might become a fetish if chosen by 'fancy'" ("Fetish II" 41). Despite this element of caprice, fetish choice does rely upon a certain kind of logic, even if it is one of chance. Pietz explains that in sub-Saharan African cultures, the choice of the fetish object would arise from a "first encounter between a new purposive desire and a material object" ("Fetish I" 8), an idea that has followed the fetish into Western fetish theory. Smith seems to endorse this understanding of Maria Montez as an encountered object whose meaning is tied to a simultaneously adopted ongoing purpose: "Having Maria Montez as a favorite star has not been gratuitous (though it was in 1945) since it has left a residue of notions, interesting to me as a film-maker and general film aesthete" (30). Smith does not elaborate upon what he means by this residue of notions, but one way of discerning his possible meaning is to note that during the timeframe he gives for choosing Montez as his favorite— 1945— Smith, who was born in 1932, would have just been entering puberty. The sexual demands that arise during the transition from childhood to adulthood are difficult for many gay kids, and they may have been especially difficult for Smith. Throughout his life, Smith expressed conflicting (and conflicted) attitudes about his sexual attraction to other men. Edward Leffingwell, for instance, describes Smith as "ambivalently sexed, a man who loved women and was obsessed by betrayal, he alternately decried garden-variety homosexuals and pronounced

himself a queer" (71). Meanwhile, Isabel Eberstadt, one of Smith's close friends and patrons tells how Smith often complained of "his 'sorry relations with women,' his 'sick relations with men'" (Eberstadt 71).[5] Perhaps in Montez, Smith found a fetish that allowed him to work through his conflicted ideas and feelings about gender identity and sexual self-hood.[6] The way that *Flaming Creatures* draws on Smith's Montezland scenario to imagine new ways of depicting sexualized bodies lends support to this idea.

Smith was very clear about his belief that new ideas both require and generate new forms of representation. In his interview with Lotringer, he announced, "whatever new thoughts you can think of that the world needs will be automatically clothed in the most radiant language imaginable" (251). He was equally as forthcoming about his belief that the world needed new ideas: "The world is starving for thoughts. I worry about the thoughts. A new thought must come out in a new language" (248). If we interpret Smith's use of the word 'language' to mean any and all forms of signification, these comments suggest that new ways of conceiving the embodiment of gender and sexuality drive *Flaming Creatures* tableaux of bizarrely entangled body parts. Although rarely understood as body making, many critics have noted the novel way that Smith's film charts ambiguous body topographies. Jonas Mekas, apparently blindsided by the explicitness of the film's somatic imagery, does at least notice this imagery's irreverent newness. On awarding Smith *Film Culture's* Fifth Independent Film Award, Mekas writes that Smith "has attained for the first time in motion pictures a high level of art which is absolutely lacking in decorum; and a treatment of sex which makes us aware of the restraint of all previous filmmakers" (1). Parker Tyler notices the way the film confuses both homosexuality and transvestitism by including women in its "orgy":

"Instead of the homosexual orgy we find in [Visconti's] *The Damned* and [Anger's] *Scorpio Rising*— both of these oriented to male militarism, both finally excluding women altogether— Smith's peculiar transvestite cosmetic concerns flirtation between males in drag that turns into flirtation with real women" (*Screening* 237). Recent critics have noted how the film's explicit depictions of genitalia somehow remain resolutely non-titillating. Juan Suárez notes that film "is not so much prurient as droll. The absurd close-ups of penises, testicles, and breasts; the overacted sensuousness of lipsticked mouths pouting and kissing, or the genteel mien of a few drag queens posed like grand dames, skittering about in summer dresses to the rhythm of a Far-Eastern tune— all of these images are suffused with a sort of pot induced hilarity and parodic wit that undermines the seriousness usually required by pornography" (185). Similarly, Marc Siegel observes, "What unites the most explicit images of genitalia in the film— from the limp penis that dangles over the shoulder of another creature who is seemingly unaware of its presence to the quivering breast that is revealed during the rape scene— is a defiant disregard for the role of the genitals within normative regimes of sexuality" (101). Interestingly, the critic who comes closest to framing the film's chaotic representations of gender and sexuality as experiments in body making is one of its firsts. Susan Sontag declares, "The film is built out of a complex web of ambiguities and ambivalences, whose primary image is the confusion of male and female flesh. The shaken breast and the shaken penis become interchangeable" (230).

Flaming Creatures does confound our usual understandings of gendered and sexualized flesh by weaving its bodies of uncertain gender into inscrutable arabesques. This apparent somatic chaos, however, also has its history in Western fetish theory. As

Pietz explains "fetishes were external objects whose religious power consisted of their status almost as personal organs affecting the health and concrete life of the individual" ("Fetish II" 44). Because such a fetish could act as "a kind of external controlling organ directed by powers outside the affected person's will, the fetish represents a subversion of the ideal of the autonomously determined self ("Fetish II" 23). In fact, the fetish is understood to subject "the human body (as the material locus of action and desire) to the influence of certain significant material objects that, although cut off from the body, function as its controlling organs at certain moments." ("Fetish I" 10). The image of Maria Montez arguably acts as such a controlling organ in *Flaming Creatures*. Theater of the Ridiculous founder Ron Tavel, who assisted Smith during the filming of *Flaming Creatures*, has pointed out that "the numerous, languorously posed ladies and gents posing as ladies in *Flaming Creatures* are lesser printouts of the poster art for [Maria Montez's] films, and in particular of the most popular ones for which she invariably modeled, whether painted or photoed, in alluring recumbent positions" ("Maria" 96). According to Tavel, Smith's fetishistic attention to Montez's self-conscious posing directly drives much of this film's somatic imagery.

Smith's Montez fetish, however, drives this film's construction of gendered and sexualized bodies even more powerfully when its controlling agency is less direct. It does so in a way that recalls Judith Butler's challenge to Lacan's psychoanalytic theories of somatic integration in her essay "The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary." Butler notes that the "materiality of the body is not to be taken for granted, for in some sense it is acquired, constituted, through the development of morphology" (69). Psychoanalysis has generated such theories of morphology, which depict human

agency shaping bodies as if they were containers for selves. Butler explains that the "notion of the bodily ego in Freud and that of the projective idealization of the body in Lacan suggest that the very contours of the body, the delimitations of anatomy, are in part the consequence of an externalized identification." (90). For Butler, Lacan's mirror stage is the perfect example of a psychoanalytic narrative in which the mind moulds the body. In the mirror stage "the very sense of the body is generated through [a] projection of ideality and integrity. Indeed this mirroring transforms a lived sense of disunity and loss of control into an ideal of integrity and control ("la puissance") through that event of specularization" (Butler 75). Butler is quick to qualify that the "mirror stage is not a *developmental* account of how the idea of one's own body comes into being" (71). Instead, Butler reads Lacan's mirror as a metaphor, one which suggests "that the capacity to project a *morphe*, a shape, onto a surface is part of the psychic (and the phantasmatic) elaboration, centering, and containment of one's own bodily contours" (71). By assuming Lacan's denaturalizing description of the human body as a mental projection and then dislodging it from any specific moment of an individual's development, Butler is able to recast Lacan's body-making narrative as an on-going, desire-driven process. She proposes that the psychoanalytic morphology is "motivated by a transfigurative wish. And that wishfulness proper to all morphogenesis is itself prepared and structured by a culturally complex signifying chain that not only constitutes sexuality, but establishes sexuality as a site where bodies and anatomies are perpetually reconstituted" (90). Here, Butler's reworking of Lacanian morphology not only denaturalizes morphogenesis, which she depicts as a reiterative performance rather than a transforming moment, but

also demystifies its motivation, which she presents as culturally constructed (i.e. a "culturally complex signifying chain") rather than somehow essential.

This critical move allows Butler to render our current understandings of morphology as thoroughly culturally constructed and thus open to change. In fact, her essay explicitly calls for alternatives to our current methods of phantasmatic body construction, which she claims are too dependent upon the notion of the penis as the privileged body part around which our variously gendered and sexualized bodies are built. Butler explains that the ideal of a hypostacized center of integrity and control that installs bodily boundaries is synonymous with phallic power (83). In other words, the transformative wish that seeks control of one's own body (the morphological impetus) is identical to the wish that seeks sexual control of other bodies (the phallus). Moreover, the phallus, despite Lacan's frequent claims to the contrary, is at least in popular consciousness identical to the penis. As Butler explains, this popular confusion matters: "It is not enough to claim that the signifier is not the same as the signified (phallus/penis), if both terms are nevertheless bound to each other by an essential relation in which that difference is contained" (90). Rather than simply bemoaning the popular conflation of the penis and the phallus, Butler draws our attention to how we might destabilize it. She writes, "The 'structure' by which the phallus signifies the penis as its privileged occasion exists only through being instituted and reiterated, and, by virtue of that temporalization, is unstable and open to subversive repetition" (90). Moreover, she proposes that we actively imagine substitutes for the penis in the role of the phallus: "If what comes to signify under the sign of the phallus are a number of body parts, discursive performatives,

alternative fetishes, to name a few, then the symbolic position of "having" has been dislodged from the penis as its privileged anatomical (or non-anatomical) occasion" (89).

Here is where Butler's discussion provides a framework for understanding how Smith's Montez fixation most powerfully drives his film's reconfiguration of bodies. By latching on to Maria Montez as a fetish figure that allows him to re-imagine sexuality and sexual-selfhood, Smith places his Montez fetish in the role of the phallus.[7] As Butler explains, such a radical substitution at the source of phallic power cannot help but to "reinstitute sexed bodies in variable ways" (91). In *Flaming Creatures* Smith's substitution creates such variably sexed bodies built around Maria Montez's many artificial poses. Perhaps more importantly, it depicts these bodies as explicitly *not* constructed around the phallic penis. Nayland Blake glimpses this radical difference when he observes that Smith's creatures are "not about drag . . . most drag allows men the luxury of playing at female identification without losing phallic power" (182). In Smith's film, however, phallic power is completely banished. In fact, when penises do appear in the film's complex weaving of body parts, they are noticeably limp and off-center: they are non-phallic penises.

Critics such as Juan Suárez have rightly described *Flaming Creatures* as a celebration of "gender-blurring, polymorphous desire, and constant fetishistic substitutions [that] present an unstable sort of sexuality, always en fugue through various bodies and body parts" (191). Paying attention to this film's disruptive effects is important, but understanding the process by which it produces them may be even more so. Smith's film is an object lesson in how relinquishing phallic power and embracing one's fetish can be both sexually and somatically liberating. *Flaming Creatures* tells us

that each of us is free to re-imagine our bodies and our sexual selves much more fluidly than phallic sexual regimes would have us believe.

Queer Harems

Flaming Creatures' sexual re-mapping of bodies exploits a profound semiotic power: the ability to remake what one represents. Both morphology and cinematic representation share this power. Butler herself describes morphology as a semiotic process. In her semiotic model of the morphological process, the matter that makes up a given body functions as its signified, the *morph* projected onto that body at any given instant functions as its signifier, and the ideal towards which that *morph* strives functions as its *referent*. According to Butler, the "radical difference between *referent* and *signified* is the site where the materiality of language and that of the world which it seeks to signify are perpetually negotiated" (69). In other words, our images and understandings of our bodies are always provisional. They are isolated moments in an ongoing process of becoming, and their articulation contributes to the process. Film theorist Christian Metz discusses cinematic representation in terms that similarly emphasize the power of representations to influence the dynamic realities they represent. Metz distinguishes objects from their onscreen images by noting that filmed reality "reassembles a duplicate of the original object, a duplicate which is perfectly grasped by the mind, since it is a pure product of the mind. It is the intelligibility of the object that is itself made into an object"(36). While Butler presents morphology through the language of semiosis, Metz explains the production of cinematic images through bodily metaphors. He writes, "The goal of the reconstruction is not to reproduce [the original] reality . . . [Instead] as the structural skeleton of the object made into a second object, [the

reconstruction] remains a kind of prosthesis " (36). Here, Metz's notion of the cinematic prosthesis equates image-making and body-making in a way that emphasizes how difficult it is to separate cinematic signifiers from their signifieds. Metz, in fact, states, "In the cinema the distance [between 'expression' and 'content'] is too short . . . the signifier is an image, the significate is what the image represents . . . so that it is impossible to break up the signifier without getting isomorphic segments of the significate" (62-63). To demonstrate this idea, Metz points out, "If, in an image representing three dogs, I isolate the third dog, I am necessarily isolating both the signifying and the signified third dog" (63). According to Metz, this conflation of reality and filmed reality tacitly validates film's version of the real. Metz illustrates this assertive power by noting, "A close-up of a revolver does not mean 'revolver' (a purely virtual lexical unit), but at the very least, and without speaking of the connotations, it signifies 'Here is a revolver!'" (67).

Smith consciously embraced film's blurring of real events and their representations. His comments in Mekas's September 12, 1963, "Movie Journal" column, for example, privilege the making of *Flaming Creatures* over the final product. Smith exclaims, "those were things I wanted to happen in my life and it wasn't something that we did, we really lived through it; you know what I mean? And it was really real. It just was. It was almost incidental that there was a camera around" (Mekas *Movie* 95). This dedication to staging as an end in itself stands out in Smith's filmmaking. Tony Conrad emphasizes it as he recalls the extensive preparations taken on the film's set: "And boy, was I surprised when it turned out that people took three hours to put on their makeup; I was very more surprised when people took several more hours to put on their costumes"

(64). Moreover, Conrad echoes Smith's depiction of *Flaming Creatures* as a ritual performance when he writes, "I fantasized at that point that my friends would indeed be shocked and disturbed to witness my participation in this revelry" (64).

Smith's inordinate attention to *mise-en-scène*, particularly make-up and costumes, lend his film mythic qualities. Suárez senses this when he writes, "The moody, grainy black and white of the images, resulting from the sensitive, outdated film stock, and the vintage costumes of the performers connote old movie glamour from an indefinite past, contributing to the film's unspecified temporality" (188). While Suárez identifies *Flaming Creatures*' creation of a seemingly timeless space, Gregory Markopoulos more directly analyzes the film's ritualistic use of costumes: "Smith has discovered that outside the usually accepted relationship, the idealistic relationship of the creative artist and his character figure, the film-maker may charge the costume of the character figure" (42). According to Markopoulos, *Flaming Creatures*' use of costumes has its roots in ancient theatre: "The costume becomes the character and the character the costume. Anyone may step into the costume. The possibilities of this proven experiment become infinite and markedly revert to the ancient theatre. A costume replaces the actor or character figure" (42). Markopoulos claims that this ritual aspect of *Flaming Creatures* "permits a formidable analysis of the character figures who appear in the film, the film-makers who create the film, and the film spectators who view the film, comparable to those sacred journeys which the ancients partook, periodically, to Epidaurus, Thebes, and Lamia" (41). Markopoulos's analysis reveals how Smith's reverence for staging events leads into the realm of the mythic.

Central to *Flaming Creatures*' mythos, of course, is the figure of Maria Montez. According to Ron Tavel, Maria Montez performed a mythic function even in her most uninspired Hollywood films: "Because she was able, by reason of her unique imagination, to believe herself to be the fairy-tale princess, woman as the personification of evil, and finally the Eternal Woman in whom each man finds the answer to his destiny . . . she was able to embody all these roles" ("Theatre" 98). Montez achieved her most mythic stature, however, after her Hollywood career, under the aegis of artists like Ron Tavel and Jack Smith, who mobilized her image for their own ends. Tavel explains, "Other stars have provided an image in which to live: Maria Montez provided a vocabulary in which to robe and narrate the more memorable vanguard and radical art of our time" ("Maria" 96). Montez's bad acting style, for instance, inspired Theatre of the Ridiculous founder Tavel to conceive of acting as self-evident role playing. Meanwhile, Smith saw in Montez's bad acting the perfect image of a consciously constructed "self" navigating a self-constructed reality. Speaking of Montez's poor critical standing, he exclaimed, "Why do we object to not being convinced— why can't we enjoy phoniness? Why resent the patent "phoniness" of these films— because it holds a mirror to our own possibly" ("Perfect" 31).

Smith's latter comment shows his desire to use Maria Montez and the Montez-land scenario to reveal the artificial, and perhaps arbitrary, basis of our most commonly accepted social "realities." Not surprisingly, he seems especially interested in those that shape our sexual selves. Theresa de Lauretis's theoretical understanding of sexual fantasies and sexual economies as culturally constructed systems that mutually inform each other helps explain how *Flaming Creatures* intimates a critique of normal (and

normalizing) sexual regimes. In *The Practice of Love*, de Lauretis argues that our systems for conceiving and categorizing sexuality are steeped in the interplay of semiosis and myth. She brings Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semiosis and Freud's theory of sexuality together "to articulate more precisely the join of [the] psychic to the social by focusing, this time, on sexuality as one particular instance of a more general process that links subjectivity to social signification and material reality" (De Lauretis *Practice* 299). De Lauretis recasts Freudian sexuality as a semiotic system in which sexuality "is one form of (self-) representation, and fantasy is one specific instance of the more general process of semiosis, which enjoins subjectivity to social signification and to reality itself" (*Practice* 303). This critical move allows de Lauretis to present the psychobiological naturalization of heterosexuality and its hetero-normative sexual roles as the product of culturally constructed mythologies. She writes that the fundamental role of fantasy in sexuality "is certainly not limited to the subject of perverse desire; think, for one thing, of the importance that fashion and social performance have, in all cultures and cultural (self) representations, for the normative sexual identity of their subjects" (*Practice* 308). Her most powerful example of a structuring myth that pretends to psychobiological reality is of course the Oedipal fantasy. She writes that this myth has been "so deeply grounded in cultural representations, and so widely perpetuated by social arrangements that it could be not only naturalized as phylogenesis but projected onto the entire world as a universal phenomenon" (*Practice* 308). De Lauretis's aim here is not so much to depose the Oedipal fantasy, but to remind us of its fictive nature, to remind us of how thoroughly such self-constructed fictions have shaped who we are and how we interact with one another. For de Lauretis, Freud's theory of sexuality is more valuable for its

methodology, than for its theoretical claims. By analyzing how subjectivity "is constructed from the ground of a dominant— social *and* psychoanalytic— fiction, [Freud] intimated and opened the critical path to understanding the semiosic nature of fantasy as that which links the subject to the social through sexuality" (*Practice* 308). De Lauretis rereads Freud to expose primal fantasies as enabling fictions, culturally constructed myths that preserve the status quo relations they pretend to explain.

While de Lauretis emphasizes the artificiality of the Oedipal myth, Smith's *Flaming Creatures* denaturalizes an equally powerful primal fantasy, that of the colonial harem. According to Malek Alloula, the harem fantasy has its roots in colonial politics. It metaphorically depicts North African cultures as a "lascivious world of idle women that lie adorned as if ready for unending festivities" (35). Postcolonial critic Ella Shohat explains the political ramifications of this metaphor when she writes, "Exoticizing and eroticizing the Third World allowed the imperial imaginary to play out its own fantasies of sexual domination" (47). In other words, during the height of twentieth-century colonialism, the harem fantasy pursued Western political ambitions under the guise of pursuing sexual gratification. Alloula notes that rather than "being the contrivance of any single individual, this phantasm [of the harem] is the equivalent of a mental habit (*mentalité*), a 'cultural' habitus" (68). Because the harem fantasy has so fully saturated Western culture, it has exceeded its political aims and accrued mythic power. As Alloula explains, "A simple allusion to it is enough to open wide the floodgate of hallucination just as it is about to run dry"(3). And the hallucinatory ideal that the harem fantasy promotes is a "presumed absence of limitation to a sexual pleasure lived in the mode of frenzy" (Alloula 49).

Smith's film takes up this latter idea of the harem as a "universe of *generalized perversion* and the *absolute limitlessness of pleasure*" (Alloula 95). It reassembles the elements of this fantasy, however, to serve queer, rather than imperialist, aims. One of the central roles in the colonial harem fantasy, for instance, is that of the odalisque. Alloula writes, "Ideal figure above all others, the odalisque is the very symbol of the harem, its highest expression. She fills it with a presence that is at once mysterious and luminous. She is its hidden, yet available, core, always throbbing with restrained sensuality"(74). In the colonial harem, the odalisque may tease, but she will ultimately fulfill the imperialist gaze. Alloula writes, "And then it begins: one odalisque is lying down with her blouse indecently wide open, exposing alluring breasts that entice the eyes (78). In *Flaming Creatures,* Maria Montez arguably plays the role of the odalisque. She is certainly the hidden core of Smith's harem. Still, she never exposes herself as the to-be-gazed-upon object of Smith's film. Instead, she exists as the harem's organizing vision. In the colonial harem fantasy, the odalisque functions as a specular object. In Smith's queer alteration of this fantasy, the odalisque is the author of the gaze— the catalyst for a polymorphously perverse vision of sexual economy.

Smith's queer harem almost exactly mirrors the colonial harem, except for the significant fact that it valorizes that which the colonial harem laments, the absence of heterosexual satiation. Alloula describes the colonial harem as "an erotic universe in which there are no men" (96). He elaborates, "This lack of the phallus is eloquently symbolized by the two figures of the High Lord, who can neither enjoy all the women in his seraglio nor satisfy them, and of the eunuchs, who are the absolute negation of the male principle" (96). Alloula presents the colonial harem fantasy's removal of male

heterosexual agency as an impediment to pleasure: " Ordered around this absence of the phallus, which it proclaims in its own way, the harem adds another feature to the phantasm: frustration (96). In fact, as Alloula further describes this fantasy's lack of male agency his interpretive ideas wax Oedipal. He writes that the harem fantasy's interplay of pleasure and frustration dramatizes "the fear of castration. The harem fantasy is also the locus of the forbidden without appeal: any transgression is paid with loss of life after subjection to the worst torments, applied with cruel refinement"(96).

While Alloula's colonial harem fantasy descends into Oedipal anxieties, Smith's queer harem revels in phallic absence. Michael Moon senses this when he describes *Flaming Creatures* as gay resistance masquerading as a Scheherezade party. In Smith's harem fantasy all of the harem's roles "short circuit their relations to the heterosexualized representational regimes from which they derive"(Moon 82). In fact, *Flaming Creatures* celebrates the harem fantasy's dismantling of phallic sexuality. Smith's film emphasizes this aspect of the harem fantasy to propose a sexual economy that is more expansive than Oedipal sexuality, a sexual economy that makes room for all of Smith's alternately mapped sexual bodies.

In true camp style, Smith simultaneously presents his queer seraglios as travesties of mainstream sexuality and utopian alternatives to it. *Flaming Creatures*, like many of Smith's later performance pieces, often makes fun of the harem imagery it invokes. Think of its shots featuring limp penises draped in veils. Still, Smith's fascination with harems suffused not only his art, but also his life. Ken Jacobs traces Smith's obsession with harems to his adolescence. When Smith was only a teenager, he produced an 8mm movie called *The Saracens*. According to Jacobs "the filmmaker's mother had sewn

Arabian costumes for the neighborhood kids, and the roofs of suburban Kenosha, Wisconsin, loomed over the fluttering sheets that marked the borders of the Caliph's seraglio"(Hoberman 42). Meanwhile, Nick Zedd reports that, at the end of his life, Smith was still constructing a "fantasy world" based on Hollywood harems. He writes that Smith's tiny sixth floor walk-up looked "like a kindergarten version of Baghdad. The bathroom was a lagoon filled with plastic vines. His bathtub was filled with moss . . . The doorframes were modified with spackle to resemble Arabian arches" (Sargeant 105). Smith apparently never stopped trying to remake the world into one of his fantasy seraglios.

Richard Dyer has observed, "Gay culture is ambivalent about its construction of a fantasy scene that is both keenly desired and obviously a put-on" (*Heavenly*182). *Flaming Creatures* responds to this double-consciousness by refusing all forms of abjection. Its somatic imagery ignores phallic law to propose a wider array of bodies and sexualities. Its staged rituals then mine broadly based cultural fantasies to imagine a more inclusive sexual economy that can accommodate these bodies. In the process, Smith's film also pioneers a new aesthetic, one that liberates the cinematic image from the tyranny of good technique. This so-called "trash aesthetic," which finds artistic potential in bad acting, muddy lighting, decaying film stocks, and dilapidated sets, was rooted in Smith's stubborn refusal to validate the status quo by adopting its artistic standards. Smith once described Maria Montez films in a way that seemed more accurately to describe his own aesthetic process: "[A]n inflexible person committed to an obsession was given his way through some circumstance. Results of this sort of thing TRANSCEND FILM TECHNIQUE. Not barely— but resoundingly, meaningfully, with

magnificence, with the vigor that one exposed human being always has" ("Perfect" 30). Smith's bombastic language here is absurdly funny. Still, its very willingness to embrace excess emphasizes the transformative power that an inflexible artist can still wield in the world.

Smith's trash aesthetic and its valorization of the degraded would influence POP art. It is therefore not so surprisingly that Andy Warhol would build on many of Jack Smith's cinematic innovations.[8] P. Adams Sitney observes, "Warhol shared Smith's fascination with Hollywood and parodied its star system; he distilled and formalized the dense black and white texture of Smith's cinematography, and he, like Smith, encouraged his followers to give themselves ironic pseudonyms" ("Jack" 69). Sitney also notes that "Warhol radicalized and mechanized Smith's aggressive use of time" ("Jack" 69). Sitney, however, does not identify what may be the most important continuity between Smith and Warhol: their shared project of assembling conspicuously queer spaces from the fragments of their everyday worlds.

Notes

[1] P. Adams Sitney reports that after Cornell's 1936 screening of *Rose Hobart* at the Julien Levy gallery, "Salvador Dali became vicious and violent . . . Gala Dali later apologized to Cornell for her husband, explaining that Dali believed that Cornell had stolen ideas he had thought about but never executed" ("Cinematic Gaze" 77).

[2] Mark Booth deserves credit here as an early, if not the earliest, gay critic to assert camp's political function for early and mid-twentieth-century homosexual communities. His 1983 article formulates that "[t]o be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits" (69).

[3] Rene Ricard attests to this contempt: "For Jack the supreme insult was 'Careerist' . . . success made you mediocre" (68). Smith's hatred of status quo acceptability was so thorough that he could even accuse an outsider figure like Allen Ginsberg of being a "walking career," an accusation he made to Ginsberg's face when Ginsberg visited Smith on his deathbed (Ricard 68).

[4] Pietz provides a fascinating etymology of the word "fetish" from its English form, back through the Dutch "*Fetissos*," the Portugese "*feitiços*," the Spanish "*fechizo*," and the Latin *Facturae*, which denoted "incantations, sacrileges, auguries, or witchcrafts" ("Fetish II" 34). The Portugese form is the first that Pietz identifies being used in regard to sub-Saharan Africa. He cites a 1505 text by a Portuages trader named Pacheco Pereira who writes that the 'Boulooes' of Sierra Leone are "all idolaters and sorcerers and are ruled by witchcraft [*sam idolatres e feiticeiros, e por feitiços se Regem*], placing their faith in oracles and demons" ("Fetish II" 37).

[5] Apparently the homophile community of the early 1960s and the gay community of the 1970s had similarly ambivalent feelings about Smith. In a 1964 letter to Jonas Mekas, the director of the Homosexual League of New York, applauded Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950) but found *Flaming Creatures*, with which it was shown, "long disturbing and psychologically unpleasant (Leffingwell 74). The letter writer seemed especially annoyed by the film's revelry in artifice: "Why don't the filmmakers produce an authentic film about a love affair or something between two boys which takes place in a contemporary homosexual setting" (Leffingwell 74). Later, in his 1978 interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Smith describes a gay theatre owner's recent rejection of his work: "I took my program to a gay theatre, and he couldn't understand how it was gay, because he was unable to see it in a context. If it wasn't discussing exactly how many inches was my first lollipop, well then it wouldn't be anything they'd be interested in" (249).

[6] Smith's own comments lend credence to the idea that he saw filmmaking as a way to work out mental conflicts. In his interview with Malanga, Smith playfully describes performing for the camera as a version of therapy: "I never could afford psychoanalysis . . . — it was very brave of me to take psychoanalysis in that form" (14).

[7] Smith's conception of film as mirror before which one shapes one's identity lends credence to the idea that Smith saw his films as active exercises in morphology: " Film for these film romanticists [is] a place. Not the classically inclined conception [of] a strip of stuff (Before a mirror is a place) is a place where it is possible to clown, to pose, to act out fantasies" ("Perfect" 30).

[8] Tony Conrad, while admitting continuities between Jack Smith and Andy Warhol, is quick to point out a significant opposition, namely that Smith worked with a poverty aesthetic, while Warhol's filmmaking style relied upon a relative wealth of supplies and manpower. He writes, "It's interesting what happened with Warhol. There was all of this production going on, and in the shooting of *Flaming Creatures* and also *Normal Love*, there was a cast of superstars that Jack had carefully cultivated and worked with. . . But this galaxy of stars that Jack had fulfilled through his own ability to find a special horizon where a star could climb into the sky, this scene was a careful construction that was painfully pieced together out of opportunities to borrow cameras and to manipulate miniscule advantages, saving pennies earned through horrible and absolutely over-extenuating stints at the office temporaries scene, and shoplifted film and other support supplies, and no lighting meter to work with and so forth. Just the most feeble and pathetic technical support structure you can imagine. Enter Andy. . . . He had a camera

that would take a half hour of film, and he would load up 1000 or 1200 feet of film and turn the camera on and just walk out of the room. And in the economy of despair that had prevailed, that kind of action was absolutely mind-popping"(Conrad 67).

CHAPTER 5
ANDY WARHOL'S CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS: *KISS* AND *HAIRCUT (NO. 1)*

Andy Warhol's *Kiss* (1963) and *Haircut (No. 1)* (1963) are unsettling films. In the early sixties, even jaded underground-film viewers sometimes squirmed at their homoeroticism. Today, these films still trouble audiences. Homophobic viewers object when *Kiss* and *Haircut (No. 1)* show casual erotic contact between men. Meanwhile, gay-affirmative audience members often just as vehemently balk at the coy ways that these films represent such contact. Bold as these films are, their depictions of same-sex desire remain somewhat ambiguous. For some, this indeterminacy reflects nothing more than homosexual censorship from the unenlightened past. The candor of Warhol's images, however, suggests anything but censorship. Instead, *Kiss* and *Haircut (No. 1)* purposely project ambiguity. They explore contradictory understandings of homosexuality that still guide our thinking today, and they do so by exploring tensions inherent in cinematic representation.

As Eve Sedgwick has noted, contradictory ideas structure our culture's definition of homosexuality. The first of these is the nonsensical way that our culture simultaneously minoritizes and universalizes homosexuality. On the one hand, we understand homosexuality as a character trait that defines a minority group, while, on the other hand, we also understand homosexuality as collection of behaviors that informs all sexualities. Sedgwick illuminates another paradox in the way that these disparate views of homosexuality alternately relate to gender. On the one hand, homosexuality suggests

gender essentialism (the woman-identified-woman or the gay-male-clone), while, on the other hand, homosexuality invokes gender inversion (the masculinized woman or the effeminate male) (*Epistemology* 85).

These incompatible understandings of homosexuality have inextricably vexed all connections between sexuality and identity. Because it lacks clear definition, homosexuality has become a conceptual catchall for practically any behaviors that do not fit our culture's template for properly performing heterosexuality. This cognitive slippage facilitates an illusion of coherence for heterosexuality, an illusion that proves to be repressive for everyone. Meanwhile, the Stonewall-inspired strategy of presenting homosexuality as a seemingly coherent counter-force to such heterosexism ends up furthering repressive norms that are arguably as odious as those that they set out to challenge.[1]

Embracing Incoherence

Warhol's images of same-sex desire in his early films such as *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)* privilege less coherence rather than more of it, and, as a result, hint at a solution to this apparent stalemate. Unlike Stonewall inspired political strategies, Warhol's pre-Stonewall cinema presumes no need for coherent sexual identities in order to launch resistance. Instead, Warhol's work suggests a mutual interdependence between cultural incoherences and individual incoherences, through which the two continually inform each other. For instance, Pop Art, which Warhol pioneered, revels in recasting the most ambiguous and anonymous of cultural signifiers, such as commercial packaging, as personal expressions of the artist, without attempting to embellish the resolution of these signifiers in the least. In an interview with Gretchen Berg in 1967, Warhol announced, "I

can't tell you what Pop Art is: it's too involved: it's just taking the outside and putting it on the inside or taking the inside and putting it on the outside" (57). Warhol's statement here admits to the irresolution of his art (he cannot tell us what it is), but casually dissolves the boundary between individual identity (the inside) and cultural construction (the outside). Just as Sedgwick demonstrates how we oscillate between contradictory definitions of homosexuality, Warhol points out how we conceptually alternate between contradictory understandings of any identity as internally driven, on the one hand, and externally shaped, on the other. Unlike Sedgwick, however, Warhol seems more interested in making these contradictory understandings oscillate, rather than in resolving them into coherence. Moreover, as inside and outside continually alternate, the origins of our incoherent understandings of identity reveal themselves as difficult to site.

Warhol expresses a similar conflation of individual identity with cultural construction in his now famous announcement of his desire to be a machine: "The reason I'm painting this way is because I want to be a machine. Whatever I do, and do machine-like, is because it is what I want to do" (Wollen 165).[2] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's discussion of Franz Kafka's art as an "expression machine" in their 1975 *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* offers a useful framework for interpreting Warhol's announcement in relation to Sedgwick's theoretical conundrum. According to Deleuze and Guattari, certain literatures act as expression machines that aim at deterritorializing a language by pushing its inherent conflicts of signification towards their extremes (28). They call these literatures minor literatures and they call minor literatures' emphases on "internal tensions of a language [or what Sedgwick would call internal incoherences] *intensives* or *tensors*" (22). Minor literatures differ from major literatures in that they seek to develop these

intensives or tensors, rather than seeking to operate around them. In fact, minor literatures distinguish themselves by developing the internal incoherences of a language into discrete expressions through asignification (23). In other words, what before operated as incoherent reference in need of resolution becomes expressed contradiction that can produce and act.

Warhol's announcement presages Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the expression machine in that it substitutes the process of desire for the source of desire. For Warhol, the privileged ongoing process of artistic production does not fulfill artistic desire; instead, it is artistic desire itself. Hence, Warhol's statement carefully avoids resolving desire into a set of coherent goals by instead defining desire as an ongoing process that does not need a coherent reference in order to produce and act. Moreover, Warhol's statement expresses a wish to fully identify with this process that refuses to cohere but continues to produce. This identification with an incoherence that continues to produce marks the exact point where Warhol differs with Stonewall ideology. While Stonewall ideology presumes that opposition to the sexual status quo relies upon a series of coherent individual sexual identities waiting to be culturally realized, Warhol imagines a resistance that can operate without reference to such coherent identities. Consequently, whereas Stonewall ideology lodges in the irresolution of homosexual incoherence, Warhol's work deterritorializes this incoherence into expression and from it proceeds to produce a cinematic model of homosexuality that explores identity in terms of expressed irresolution.

Because Warhol's cinematic model of homosexuality embraces the irresolution of homosexual definition, rather than attempting to elide it or force it into a resolution, his model of homosexual community and identity stands in marked contrast to

both the universalizing models of identity and community in the pre-Stonewall homophile movements and the minoritizing identity models that have arisen since Stonewall. As a result, reexamining Warhol's filmic representations of male homosexuality in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's minor literature model yields mappings for the intersection of same-sex desire, identity and community that move beyond the apparent impasse of our contradictory understandings of homosexuality.

According to most post-Stonewall conceptions of political action, Warhol's work appears resolutely to confound the agenda of liberation politics. Simon Watney, for instance, sees Warhol's depictions of same-sex desire rooted in homosexual shame:

> Perhaps one reason why Warhol has been so comparatively neglected by gay cultural critics is the extent to which his work frankly and painfully enacts scenarios of homosexual shame which were largely incompatible with the aesthetic of normative 'positive images' that so dominated lesbian and gay Anglophone culture in the seventies and early eighties. (29)

Whether or not Warhol's work obliquely acts out scenarios of shame is certainly open to psychoanalytic conjecture, but Warhol's work more obviously resists direct appropriation by Stonewall-inspired liberation movements because it refuses to adopt their models of coherent homosexual identities. Since Warhol's work refuses the resolution of such identities, most current gay cultural critics have considered his work politically marginal, if not altogether counter-productive to liberatory political aims. Nonetheless, as Deleuze and Guattari are quick to stress in relation to Kafka, the apolitical artist's very marginality, especially in reference to his or her own fragile community, allows this artist all the more possibility of expressing another possible community in terms of what Deleuze and Guattari call micropolitics, or "a politics of desire that questions all situations" (42). Because of its very marginality in reference to the Stonewall ideology of coherent gay and

lesbian identities, Warhol's cinema indirectly offers another possible community for liberation politics. By exploring the micropolitics of same-sex desires, Warhol's cinema gives expression to such individual desires without resolving these desires into either of our contradictory understandings of homosexuality. In fact, Warhol's films imagine situations in which erotic behaviors destabilize normative sexuality precisely because they defy narrative resolution altogether.

Never-ending Kisses & Everyday Excess

One of the chief ways that Warhol gives productive expression to such unresolved eroticism is by locating and exaggerating the potential for incoherence that has been built into commercial cinema's signifying system. Specifically, Warhol returns to the origins of film to explore cinematic strategies that de-emphasize narrative. Tom Gunning has termed these early approaches to filmmaking the "cinema of attractions."[3] Cinematic attractions are spectacles recorded by the camera that "address the viewer directly, soliciting attention and curiosity through acts of display," which for the most part remain unnarrativized ("Gawking" 190). While earlier film historians have dismissed films built around such attractions as "obstacles in the course of [narrative film's] proper maturation," Gunning posits the cinema of attractions as a viable alternative to commercial cinema's system of continuity and narrative resolution ("Gawking" 190). According to Gunning, the dominant commercial cinema retains traces of the cinema of attractions. But, it subordinates them to plot, so that "attractions persist in the interaction between spectacle and narrative" ("Gawking" 191). In other words, the cinematic attraction endures as an internal tension of cinematic expression.

Warhol's films not only revive the cinematic attraction, but they push its inherent

conflicts of signification towards their extremes. They thus produce something that might be termed a "minor" cinema, parallel to the "minor" literatures theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "minor" literatures differ from "major" literatures in that they seek to develop the internal tensions of a language, rather than seeking to operate around them (28). In fact, "minor" literatures distinguish themselves by magnifying the inconsistencies of a language. What before operated as incoherent reference in need of resolution becomes expressed contradiction that can produce and act.

Deleuze and Guattari's minor literatures move language to its extremes by isolating and magnifying internal tensions culled from the major literatures from which they have developed. Similarly, Warhol's cinema pushes cinematic expression to its extremes by isolating and magnifying the tension of the cinematic attraction. While the commercial cinema contains the attraction in its system of visual and narrative continuity, Warhol's cinema privileges the cinematic attraction in order to disrupt such coherence. Consequently, Warhol's counter-cinema arguably operates as a "minor" cinema in relation to the major cinema of America and Hollywood.

Kiss and *Haircut (No.1)* participate in this "minor" cinema by exploiting one particular kind of cinematic attraction: the display of the ordinary. Although many early films sought to capture and reproduce public spectacles,[4] such as the movements of massive crowds or the operation of powerful new machines, others chose to present everyday events. *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)* respectively appear to remake two such prosaic cinematic attractions produced by Thomas Alva Edison, *The May Irwin Kiss* (1896) and *The Barber Shop* (1894).[5] *The May Irwin Kiss* presents two demonstrative pecks between

a man and a woman (Figure 5-1), while *The Barber Shop* presents two men waiting in a barber shop while the barber shaves a third man. According to Gunning, the draw of such early films laid in their open acknowledgment of "their own process of display and the viewer's role as an 'outside observer" ("Gawking" 190). As such, both *The May Irwin Kiss* and *The Barber Shop* offer Warhol's *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)* opportunities for examining fragmentation, documentation and display in relation to ordinariness.

Warhol, however, pushes his representations of the mundane towards incoherence. Whereas early cinema would present its interesting ordinary moments only briefly so that the camera could better imitate a culturally acceptable public gaze, *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)* absurdly extend the stare of the camera. By prolonging the camera's gaze, these films combine the duration of narrativity with the fragmentation and display of the banal attraction. As a result, in *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)*, ordinariness becomes a site of heightened tension between coherence and incoherence. Moreover, *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)* specifically situate images of male same-sex desire within their intensified representations of the everyday. Thus, the alternation between coherence and incoherence in these films' cinematic representations of the ordinary blur with our culture's incoherent, contradictory definitions of homosexuality.

The May Irwin Kiss, probably the first known cinematic love scene, presents its attraction in less than one minute.[6] Warhol's *Kiss*, however, subjects its osculatory attractions to much greater scrutiny. His movie, which consists of thirteen roughly-four minute reels, each of which features a non-stop kissing session, runs over fifty times as long as Edison's original. During this fifty-five minute long study, *Kiss* subjects male same-sex desire to considerable scrutiny as well. The film's fourth reel presents two young

men passionately kissing for the entire reel (Figure 5-2), while its sixth reel presents two adult men kissing just as passionately and for just as long. Meanwhile, the other eleven episodes present male/female kissing partners who sometimes differ in race or vastly differ in age. There is even a nod towards bisexuality: one of the men kissing another man in the sixth reel shows up passionately kissing a woman throughout the twelfth. All reels considered together, *Kiss* indexes our culture's universalizing model of homosexuality: we all like to kiss, but heterosexual kissing, which takes up eleven reels, is the norm, and same-sex kissing, which takes up two reels, is the aberration that helps define this heterosexual norm.

However, as Peter Wollen notes, *Kiss* was publicly screened in weekly installments, so that "a different *Kiss* opened every screening at the Film-Makers Co-op for a period of time" (167). Each kissing session therefore presents a new attraction. Seen in this context, *Kiss*'s fourth installment, which shows two men kissing, approaches our culture's minoritizing model of homosexuality. Its imagery of men intensely kissing for four minutes presents same-sex desire as an autonomous alternative to heterosexuality, rather than presenting it as a counter-support. Here, the variance in *Kiss*'s exhibition strategies mimics our contradictory understandings of homosexuality. When all the *Kiss* reels are shown together, the effect is universalizing. When they are shown separately, the effect is minoritizing.

It is maybe not so surprising that *Kiss*'s exhibition strategies would replicate our culture's paradoxical understandings of homosexuality. *Kiss*'s formal experimentation, however, further highlights our tenuous understanding of sexuality in the way that it de-narrativizes the cinematic kiss. *Kiss* isolates the cinematic attraction of the love scene,

Figure 5-1. *The May Irwin Kiss* (1896)

Figure 5-2. Warhol's *Kiss* (1963), Reel Four.

which commercial cinema almost always subordinates to narrative coherence, and draws it out for almost an hour. The sustained literalness of what first appears to be on-screen intimacy eventually confounds any comprehensible cinematic code by temporally exceeding it. *Kiss*'s super-long kissing scenes depict desire as insatiable and thus, by extension, incomprehensible.

Although *Kiss*'s most salient feature is this explicit intensification of cinema's inability to fully represent the experience of desire, critics Jonathan Flatley and Parker Tyler seem purposefully to elide this formal concern of the film. Instead, these critics impose models of coherent desire onto the film by focussing on its profilmic display. For instance, Flatley claims that "Warhol teaches us that the potentially minoritizing and exclusive world of images-- the 'real' world-- can be haunted by the fictive, because it always already was" (126). Here, Flatley suggests that the ritual staging of the film's kisses implies a coherence that haunts *Kiss*'s imagery. Although Flatley initially notes how *Kiss* emphasizes its own processes of representation, he dismisses the way that *Kiss* privileges representational irresolution. Instead, he opts for imagining a fictive coherence that *Kiss*'s representations deny. Similarly, Parker Tyler tacitly endorses the supposed transparency of traditional strategies for representing desire when he accuses *Kiss* "of tiring its subjects and forcing them to fresh prodigies of osculative style to justify, it seems, the camera time being spent on them" ("Dragtime"101). In Tyler's rush to categorize *Kiss* as a parody, he too attempts to reinstate the very privileging of coherent sexuality that *Kiss* challenges. Tyler first presumes some originary coherence in the nature of individual desire that *Kiss*'s attenuation of the cinematic love scene distorts. He then further invokes cultural standards of coherence by attempting to attribute logical motivations to the

behaviors of the film's stars. *Kiss*, however, carefully avoids making such distinctions. The unresolved sexual attractions it records are matched by the anti-narrative structure of their cinematic expression.

Critics who direct their attention towards *Kiss*'s representational incoherence come closer to revealing how it revisits the cinematic attraction in order to privilege irresolution. For instance, Michael O'Pray notes that in Warhol's cinema "duration confronts the spectator with film itself as material and as a process of representation" (177). Similarly, Gregory Battcock's insights about the temporal structure of Warhol's *Empire* (1964) hold true for the temporal structure of *Kiss* as well: "It is distorted, perhaps, simply by its *not* being distorted when one would reasonably expect it to be" (44). O'Pray's comment draws a distinction between *Kiss*'s materiality and its representational transparency. Meanwhile, Battcock's comment draws a distinction between *Kiss*'s temporal adherence and its temporal coherence. His comments suggest that the temporal fidelity of *Kiss*'s representations of kissing ironically extend the ambiguity of these representations. Together these comments point to the way that *Kiss* privileges the incoherence of materiality over the coherence of representability. Warhol's film, by emphasizing such a disjuncture between materiality and representability, highlights the inadequacy of our cinematic language, and by implication our cultural narratives, to account for any sustained desire that does not visibly progress to a resolution.

Kiss's unusually explicit sensuality rapidly asignifies not because images of sensuality and desire find no worthy referents in us as viewers, but because our referential systems for attributing meaning demand such severe delimitation. As a result, the sustained kissing sequences in *Kiss* quickly register as culturally incoherent. *Kiss*, by

conspicuously refusing even minimally to narrativize the kisses that it presents, asks the question "Why should we narrativize desire at all?" Moreover, because *Kiss* includes male/male kissing sessions in its series of scrutinized cinematic attractions, *Kiss* similarly challenges the narrativization of same-sex attraction as any more or less coherent than any other desire.

Si(gh)ting Incoherence: Homoerotic Haircuts

Kiss thus experiments with ways of depicting same-sex attraction as part of a larger inquiry into all varieties of sexual representation. Warhol's haircut movies may have intended to expand this project. For instance, Reva Wolf notes that Warhol was producing *Kiss* reels and haircutting films in between each other and that "the existence of at least three distinct Warhol movies with the title *Haircut* suggests that he may have also originally envisioned them as a serial work" (42). The haircut movies, however, were never released in serial form. Moreover, these films, especially *Haircut (No. 1)*, focus solely on strategies for representing same-sex desire.

Perhaps this is because the haircut movies have a distinctly queer genealogy. Roy-Michael Grundmann explains that Warhol's haircut movies were at least partly inspired by the haircutting parties that Billy Linich (later and more famously known as Billy Name) would give for his circle of queer friends (348). These parties pre-date Warhol's haircut films and were celebrated as homosexual gatherings in at least two poetry journals of the time.[7] Given this information, *Haircut (No. 1)* would seem merely to document one of these parties. After all, like the parties, the film features Linich as the haircutter and three of his queer friends in other roles: the poet John Daley as the haircuttee, the Judson Dance Theatre member Freddy Herko as the omnipresent onlooker, and Judson Dance Theater

choreographer James Waring as a second onlooker who appears briefly at the film's end. The movie, like many of the haircutting parties, is likewise set in James Waring's apartment.[8] Despite these similarities, the film is in fact quite staged, and its staging loosely approximates another of Edison's films, *The Barber Shop*.

While *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)* both isolate and magnify the ontological lure of the captured everyday occurrence, *Haircut (No.1)* further mines the cinema of attractions for its visual devices. It especially appears to mimic and magnify the way that *The Barber Shop* exploits tensions between competing compositional elements. Edison's film features four men sharing a single frame, which divides into two distinct visual planes of action, foreground and background. In the foreground, two men occupy either side of the frame. One sits in the far right reading a magazine, while in the far left a man smoking a pipe enters, removes his coat and hat, and then sits. In the background, a barber and his client dominate the center of the frame (Figure 5-3). Already in this opening sequence, two strategies for visual privileging, foregrounding and centering, compete. In fact, one of the most significant aspects of *The Barber Shop* is the way that its shifting compositional strategies continually mount graphic tensions between its otherwise discrete visual planes. For instance, at one point, the two men on either side of the frame stand and meet to exchange the man on the right's magazine, an action that momentarily challenges the frame's dominant strategy of privileging the barber and his customer through centering (Figure 5-4). A little later in the film, the man in the left foreground faces right and into the frame as he flips through his newly acquired magazine, while the man in the right foreground and the barber and his customer in the center background all present profiles facing left. Their leftward gazing eyelines present a compositional unity in contrast to the

Figure 5-3. Two men on either side occupy the foreground, while two centered men occupy the background in Edison's *The Barber Shop* (1894).

Figure 5-4. The men in the foreground interrupt this shot's background centering strategy in Edison's *The Barber Shop* (1894).

visual zone occupied by the rightward gazing man on the left. Consequently, this new compositional configuration interferes with the compositional strategy of foreground versus background. Similarly, the three eyelines privileging the man on the left compete with the privileged centrality of the barber and his customer. Then, the film suddenly cuts to reenact this scenario all over again for the camera. Although some of the more subtle synchronizations of movement alter, the framing, action and compositional shifts recur almost precisely, as if *The Barber Shop* were intent on demonstrating the artifice that belies its otherwise apparent ordinariness. In fact, the cinematic power of *The Barber Shop* lies in the way that its compositional strategies and carefully staged actions transform something as mundane as a moment in the barber shop into a contest for the viewer's active attention.[9]

Whereas *The Barber Shop* concerns itself only with compositional tensions, *Haircut (No. 1)* composes its visual tensions around the homoeroticized activities of its protagonists. These two tensions build on each other until they blur. *Haircut (No. 1)* most apparently blends graphic and homoerotic tensions by exploiting its protagonists' eyelines. The initial framing of *Haircut (No. 1)*, for instance, presents a straight-on shot of three men standing at various distances before the camera. Each man marks out a visual plane for himself in the shot's deep space. The composition and lighting privilege a shirtless Freddy Herko, who prominently stands in the foreground staring down at his own crotch; a key light shines directly on him, but illuminates the other men only faintly, as its light eventually fades into the black background. This shot dismantles its overwhelming direction of attention onto Herko when Herko turns and walks away from the light. Suddenly, the other men become more prominent in the shot. Nonetheless, as Herko's

figure formally recedes into the dark background, he occasionally turns his head and looks directly into the camera. The way that his eyeline calls for the viewer's attention creates visual tension by intermittently competing with the shot's shifted attention to the other two men. At the same time, all of the men's eyelines seem studiously to avoid each other as they stand shrouded by darkness, which suggests sexual tension. The fact that Herko's eyeline draws a visual equation between its first specular object, his crotch, and his second specular object, the viewer, within this vaguely-sexualized, all-male context strongly connotes homoeroticism. The shot stops short, however, of actually denoting homosexuality. As such, its compositional tensions fuse with its homoerotic tensions.

Similarly, *Haircut (No.1)*'s later framing, which more directly alludes to the framing of Edison's *The Barber Shop* and comprises the greater part of the film, compounds this last shot's blending of heightened graphic tension and homoeroticism. In this compositional setup, *Haircut (No.1)* appears to combine the two foregrounded men of *The Barber Shop* into the single figure of Herko, who dominates the left side of the frame. Meanwhile, haircuttee John Daley's profile dominates the right side of the frame, and the head of haircutter Billy Linich dominates the top center of the frame (Figure 5-5). Here, *Haircut (No.1)* reverses *The Barber Shop*'s positioning by situating the barber and his client in the foreground and the onlooker in the background. Nonetheless, its split-plane framing recalls and exaggerates *The Barber Shop*'s conflicting visual planes. Because *The Barber Shop* presents all of its characters in long shot, its competing planes of action, although distinct, are very near to each other. *Haircut (No.1)*, however, heightens the distance between foreground and background elements. Linich and Daley appear in frame-right in a tight close-up, while Herko appears much further back in frame-left in a

medium shot. In addition, deep focus techniques keep both planes in sharp focus. Consequently, *Haircut (No. 1)* magnifies the naturalized perspective slippages of *The Barber Shop* into much more iconic relationships. Daley"s full-frame face seems almost to abut Herko's upper torso. Herko and the other two men graphically appear almost to touch each other, even as distance cues suggest two separate scenes of action. Graphic composition suggests one kind of visual logic, while image size and perspective suggest another. These two contradicting visual logics never quite cohere; instead, they optically alternate throughout the film.

Also, *Haircut (No. 1)*, by strategically revising *The Barber Shop's* scant action, unleashes the homoerotic potential of the all male grooming ritual, which remains latent in *The Barber Shop.*[10] In *The Barber Shop* a man smoking a pipe enters the frame, removes his coat and hat, and leafs through a magazine. In *Haircut (No. 1)*, Herko, also using a magazine and a pipe as props, approximately repeats this action, but in a sexualized way. He in fact appears to perform a twenty-seven minute striptease between reel changes. In reel one he appears in only a hat and jeans. In reel three, he now wears a shirt and holds a magazine in his lap. In reel four the shirt comes off again, and in reels five and six the pants come off as well. Reel five shows him sitting in the nude smoking a pipe, and reel six shows him sitting in the nude, as he crosses and uncrosses his legs to flash the camera (Figure 5-6). During this striptease, *Haircut (No. 1)*'s oscillating visual logics alternately code Herko's actions as homosexual and not-necessarily-homosexual. The deep sharp focus collapses depth so that Linich's and Daley's faces often seem to graze Herko's denuded body. The iconic visual logic of the composition thus strongly connotes sexual intimacy between the men. According to the perspectival logic of the composition,

Figure 5-5. Warhol's *Haircut (No. 1)* (1963) repeats the competing visual planes of Edison's *The Barber Shop* and blends this heightened graphic tension with homoeroticism.

Figure 5-6. Freddy Herko (above) in frame-left of *Haircut (No.1)*, has performed a full strip tease by the sixth and final reel of Warhol's film.

however, Linich and Daley seem to register no reaction to Herko's strip tease, thus foiling any clear denotation of homosexual awareness. The film's action heightens the sexuality of the homoerotic situation, but its compositional strategies heighten the ambiguity of its homoeroticism.

Partial Receptions: Eluding Identity

Haircut (No.1)'s careful strategy of alternating compositional logics without resolving them sometimes registers with other critics, but, because these critics shy away from the film's homoeroticism, their interpretations of Warhol's suspension of visual coherence remain oblique. For instance, Underground film champion Jonas Mekas seems to sense that *Haircut (No.1)*'s competing compositional strategies allow the film to express a new way of comprehending spatiotemporal relations: "You are watching now from a new angle, every detail reveals new meaning, the proportions and perspectives change—you begin to notice not only the hundred-mile movements but also one inch movements" ("Notes" 40). Here, Mekas appears to grasp how *Haircut (No.1)*'s optical tease proceeds with minimal movements that slowly propel the film's oscillation between iconic and perspectival visual logics. He misses, however the way that Herko's slow strip tease similarly highlights the film's oscillation between homosexual connotation and homosexual denotation. Mekas refuses to link his formal impressions of *Haircut (No.1)* to a consideration of the film's homoerotic content. Warhol's formal play in this film creates a heady mix of shifting perspectives, relentless ordinariness, and homosexual attraction. Instead of acknowledging this queer content, Mekas waxes metaphysical: "A whole new world opens because of this shifted angle of vision, of seeing, a world in which there is much action, suspense, tension, adventure, and entertainment as on the former plane—

and more!" ("Notes" 40). Here, Mekas senses the way that *Haircut (No.1)* explores the liberatory potential of the ordinary. Nonetheless, he stubbornly disregards its homoeroticization of the ordinary, and as a result, his interpretation veers off course into vagueness and impressionism.

In contrast to Mekas's impressionistic interpretation of *Haircut (No.1)*'s formal structure, Stephen Koch methodically explains how *Haircut (No.1)* exploits a latent incoherence that abides in the compositional strategies of all commercial cinema:

> I recently watched a Sherlock Holmes film (with Basil Rathbone) on television; at any point in almost any frame of one of those klutzy hack products of thirty years ago, the eye will find enough to distract it to four or five points on the screen. The same is true of almost any commercial film one can think of. But Warhol's minimalization of visual events (and of the visual field through contrast) transforms the process of the eye's movements, its shifts of attention, into a peculiarly conscious process, for the very simple reason that those slight changes of attention are *all that is happening*. (55)

Here, Koch describes how *Haircut (No.1)* pares away the complex interplay of narrative and visual strategies that the commercial cinema employs to subordinate the cinematic attraction. In fact, he aptly describes how *Haircut (No.1)* exploits and attenuates compositional incoherences that are latent in almost any frame from a commercial film. Nonetheless, whereas Mekas overzealously (and homophobically) extends *Haircut (No.1)*'s heightening of compositional attention to the rarified atmosphere of his own metaphysical musings, Koch timidly reduces *Haircut (No.1)*'s competing compositional strategies to an imitation of "some kind of Renaissance portrait of a central figure with two attendants hovering by" (56). Koch's interpretation moves towards reduction, in part, because he dismisses Herko's homoerotic antics as merely "attendant" behavior. His dismissal of Herko is particularly startling since much of his discussion of *Haircut (No.1)*

up to this point has focused on the many ways that Herko's body strongly competes with haircuttee John Daley for the viewer's attention. Because Koch ignores Herko's studied homoeroticism, he similarly fails to notice *Haircut (No. 1)*'s studied suspension of sexual resolution.

Mekas's and Koch's reactions to *Haircut (No. 1)* seem to demonstrate Sedgwick's initial point about the way that our culture often treats homosexuality as a conceptual closet for containing incoherence. Both critics seem to sense that Warhol's film delights in magnifying the commercial cinema's ability to suspend visual coherence. Likewise, both appear to grasp the fact that this film links such a suspension of coherence to ordinary processes of comprehension. Nonetheless, both also leave these ideas behind as their discussions differently impose theories of coherence onto the film, so that they can similarly ignore its homoerotic content. Mekas moves towards metaphysical logic, imagining another cinematic world with its own coherent rules, and Koch moves to the logic of perspective and the gaze. Meanwhile the film's most salient features, its refusal to visually cohere and its overwhelming connotations of homoeroticism, are dually left unspoken and underdeveloped, critically closeted.

Whereas Mekas and Koch treat *Haircut (No. 1)*'s homoerotic imagery as a receptacle for its visual and conceptual incoherences, and then duly ignore all three, more recent, gay-affirmative critics readily engage the film's homoeroticism. More often than not, however, they divorce it from the film's refusal to visually cohere. Instead, they reshape the film's ambiguous homoeroticism to fit neatly into post-Stonewall ideologies of gay identity. For instance, Thomas Waugh cites Amy Taubin's comments from a 1990 *Village Voice* article, in which she infers an especially clearly defined sexual relationship

between haircutter Linich and haircuttee Daley, despite *Haircut (No. 1)*'s refusal to denote homosexuality:

> The action [of the haircut] can be read as foreplay or as a metaphor for a more explicit S&M exchange. The focus of attention is the bottom, the man whose hair is being cut. Immobile, he submits to the gaze of the camera and to the attentions of the top-- haircutter-- who, despite his peripheral positioning on the screen, has total control of pace, duration, and incident. Wielding a potentially lethal instrument, he has life-and-death power. (61)[11]

Here, Taubin's overzealous attempt to reclaim this film's gay content disregards *Haircut (No. 1)*'s careful development of a perspectival register that counters the homosexual connotations of its iconic register. She quickly collapses the film's visual tease (its dueling visual logics) into its sexual tease (are these boys homosexual?), and, as a result, drains it of its conceptual tease (what exactly constitutes homosexual?). Nonetheless, Taubin's very act of overreaching implicitly registers the film's resistance to resolving its oscillation between homosexual connotation and homosexual denotation. In order to read resolution into the film's ambiguous imagery, she must resort to imposing the rigid paradigm of S&M sexuality on the haircutter and haircuttee. Although Taubin's ideas here are provocative, they reach far beyond the film's denotative register in their effort to resolve *Haircut (No. 1)*'s studied ambiguity.

Waugh similarly ignores the subtleties of *Haircut (No. 1)*'s visual expression by too fully identifying it with gay porn, although this initial connection does have strong visual grounding. After all, Warhol's films share with pornography an explicit disregard for narrative development. In fact, Gunning specifically notes that "certain genres, such as pornography . . . remain closely tied to the methods of the cinema of attractions" ("Gawking" 191). Nonetheless, Waugh's comparison goes too far. He reduces *Haircut*

(No.1), along with all of Warhol's homoerotic film work, to an evolutionary step towards the goal of more recent and explicit forms of gay-male pornography. This overeager designation of Warhol as a gay pornographer minimizes Warhol's visual complexities as much as it underrates his conceptual ones.[12] In fact, Waugh's use of Taubin's interpretation provides an unusually explicit example of a widespread desire to reclaim Warhol's work as a visual precursor of post-Stonewall gay identity and to bring it in line with predominant ideologies of sexual coherence. Waugh, for instance, links Taubin's comments to the voices of Stephen Tropiano, Gary Indiana, and Bruce Brasell to extrapolate his own extended strip-tease metaphor. In Waugh's extended metaphor, an allegedly unproblematic gay identity triumphantly emerges from the clothing of sexual ambiguity:

> Together, these four critics, by focusing on the erotic effect of anticipation and power both within and around these films, sum up a formative stage in the evolution of erotic culture in the West. The tease, an erotic enunciation orchestrated like a tantalizing power game, was still the characteristic erotic rhetoric of sixties public culture, the sexual revolution notwithstanding. (61)

According to Waugh's logic, Taubin's easy conflation of *Haircut (No.1)*'s connotative homoeroticism with coherent homosexuality simply mirrors the way everyone, even and especially Warhol, allegedly conflated the two in the 1960s. In essence, Waugh dismisses *Haircut (No.1)*'s exploitation of the distance between homosexual connotation and homosexual denotation as merely a rhetorical default of a less enlightened age. Following the logic of post-Stonewall gay ideology, Waugh equates sexual ambiguity with ignorance. Since Waugh approaches *Haircut (No.1)* from a critical stance that refuses to question the demand for coherent homosexual identities, his interpretation presumes the film's implicit

homoeroticism to be just so much tedious suspense before later gay pornography would resolve homosexual desire into explicit representations of sexual acts.

From a more queer perspective, in the more recent use of this term to signal a departure from the certainties of the straight/gay/bi model of sexuality, the homoerotic imagery of *Haircut (No. 1)* and *Kiss* appear to suspend the demand for sexual resolution altogether. In fact, *Kiss* and *Haircut (No. 1)* both revisit the cinema of attractions to imagine what sexual identity and sexual attraction might look like without such a demand for resolution. *Kiss* explores this idea by displaying desire unbound from narrative structure, and by isolating and exaggerating the most ordinary contact point of sexual attraction, the kiss. *Haircut (No. 1)* explores this idea by intensifying the space between connotation and denotation by carefully blending its displays of the strip tease, the visual tease and the conceptual tease.

Moreover, both *Kiss* and *Haircut (No. 1)* place images of same-sex desire in their epistemological centers. Their material investigations of the relationship between representability and sexual resolution foreshadow queer theory's challenge to all linear narratives of coherent sexuality, including gay ones. *Kiss* challenges post-Stonewall ideology by challenging the worth of cultural resistance that is predicated on the forced resolution of individual sexualities. Meanwhile, *Haircut (No. 1)*, by heightening, rather than resolving, its homoeroticism, similarly unsettles post-Stonewall ideology's demand for coherent sexual identity. Both films celebrate the cinematic attraction by presenting their implicit critique of sexual identity through activities as mundane as kissing and haircutting. They extol ordinariness, even as they sabotage sexual certainty. While Warhol's later film work would eventually go on to equate sexual ambiguity with super-stardom, these films

play a pivotal role in his "minor" cinema. They return to the cinema of attractions to show just how ordinary refusing the imperatives of sexual identity can be.

Notes

[1] Michael Warner has cogently laid out recent arguments against the normalization of gay identity in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York : Free Press, 1999).

[2] Wollen cites G. R. Swanson's "What is Pop Art" in Artnews 62 (November 1963) as the original source for this quote.

[3] Gunning notes that he and André Gaudreault first introduced the term "cinema of attractions" at the1985 Colloquium on Film History at Cerisy in a footnote to his book *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Native Film* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 54. Gunning also traces the term's first appearance in print to his essay " The Cinema of Attractions: Early film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Grade," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3-4 (1986): 63-71.

[4] Gunning, for instance, gives the example of an 1897 "Biograph program that featured a film made from the front of a locomotive traveling through the Haverstraw tunnel" ("Gawking" 197).

[5] These dates come from Charles Musser in his book *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991). According to Musser, W. K. L. Dickson and William Heise worked together to shoot *The Barber Shop* for Edison (39), while Heise alone shot *The May Irwin Kiss* (65).

[6] Ordinariness, in fact, slides into spectacle in *The May Irwin Kiss*. The couple who kiss in the film were, according to Musser, theatre stars reenacting " the culminating moment of a popular musical farce, *The Widow Jones*. It was made at the behest of the *New York World*, which devoted a full page to 'May Irwin and John rice Posed before Edison's Kinetescope—Result: 42 Feet of Kiss in 600 Pictures'"(65). Ordinary intimacy grows ever more spectacular here, from a punctuating moment in the theatre to a movie accompanied by a full-page ad campaign.

[7] Reva Wolf identifies these journals as *The Floating Bear* and its parody, *The Sinking Bear*. John Daley, the haircuttee of *Haircut (No. 1)*, wrote "Billy Linich's Party" and published it in the November 1963 issue of *The Floating Bear*, one month before Warhol made his film. The January 1964 issue of *The Sinking Bear* ran a parody of Daley's poem (39).

[8] Grundmann, by the way, details the complex relationships among these four men and offers a detailed description of all twenty-seven minutes of *Haircut (No. 1)* (347-378).

[9] Gunning notes that the cinema of attractions, especially the train films, often exploited shifting depth cues to "provide complex visual experiences for turn-of-the-century spectators" ("Gawking," 197).

[10] Musser, by the way, glosses this aspect of *The Barber Shop* by noting that the film "depicts a homosocial environment where easy comradery is routine" (39). Apparently, Warhol senses the potential for something more sexually charged in this environment.

[11] Waugh gives a citation for the original source of Taubin's comments: "Hot Heads," a review of the film special "Reel Sex" in *The Village Voice* (December 1990): 20.

[12] Andy Warhol was certainly fascinated with pornography and regularly incorporated it into his art and films, which is all the more reason for not interpreting his obviously non-pornographic films as timid attempts at pornography. In Warhol's and Pat Hackett's *POPism: The Warhol Sixties*, Warhol exclaims, "Personally, I loved porno and I bought lots of it all the time . . . I'd always wanted to do a movie that was just pure fucking, nothing else . . . So in October'68 I shot a movie of Viva having sex with Louis Waldron. I called it just *Fuck*." (*POPism: The Warhol Sixties* [New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1980], 294). Tellingly, Warhol's title for this film alternates between genericism and scandalous specificity: even when Warhol wanted to make pure pornography, he could not resist conceptually commenting upon it.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

In an era when gay activism finds itself championing wedding chapels and combat training camps as the promised lands for an increasingly homogenous gay and lesbian community, the American underground's images of outlaw homosexual worlds are a welcome tonic. In the early sixties, these films raised queer consciousness and encouraged gay people to radically re-imagine how they could live their lives. These films continue to bear such consciousness-raising potential. As this study has shown, in 1963, Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol each challenged authoritative (and oppressive) interpretations of homosexuality with avant-garde reconfigurations of queerness. And, each artist's vision of homosexual possibility vastly differed from those of his fellow filmmakers. This cinema, and the time it documents, imagined homosexuality as something new. For the avant-garde queers of the early sixties, homosexuality's refusal of sexual norms promised a radical reevaluation of sexual selfhood and a rethinking of sexual economies. Gay culture in the twenty-first century would do well to remember this promise.

Anger, Smith and Warhol were conspicuously queer members of a larger underground film movement, one which championed a do-it-yourself approach to filmmaking and whose stated aim was to save the cinema from its ossified aesthetics. Perhaps even more significantly, they were the compatriots of other gay artists, who, although they worked in other media, similarly hoped to remake queer culture by

crafting innovative representations of homosexuality. The pioneering work of gay writers such as Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and John Rechy strongly influenced Anger, Smith and Warhol. O'Hara wrote poems that prompted gay men to consider the virtual communities they had been building through their shared worship of fallen female stars. Allen Ginsberg repackaged homosexual acts as joyous forms of social protest. William Burroughs broke age-old censorship codes to depict queer desire as a cipher for the policing of sexuality and identity. John Rechy documented a superabundance of gay worlds, revealing the many different ways of being homosexual that raucously coexisted within.

Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, with its invocation of the dead James Dean as an icon of queer consciousness, its celebration of the main character Scorpio's rebelliousness, its startling imagery, and its richly textured world of gay bikers, strongly echoes these other artists' queer visions. Anger's film innovates, however, by visually opening up a cinematic space in which queer desire appears as something much more complicated and deeply embedded in popular consciousness than previous depictions of homosexuality ever suggested. By reassembling signs from 1960s popular culture to convey this complexity, *Scorpio Rising* encourages a rethinking of the complex connections among popular culture, queer culture, sexuality, and identity. Anger's film presents homosexuality as an ongoing negotiation between the queer subject and the dominant culture's demands for normalization, an understanding whose usefulness is as timely now as ever.

Flaming Creatures, with its fetishistic worship of the dead B-film goddess Maria Montez, its wild orgies, and its myriad queer creatures, likewise echoes the work of

sixties queer literati. Still, it too initiates a unique conception of queer culture, one based on Smith's all embracing trash aesthetic. Through this aesthetic, which sees artistic promise in bad acting, muddy lighting, decaying film stocks, and dilapidated sets, Smith reclaims homosexual camp as a political discourse, one which stages absolute refusals of the status quo. In the process, *Flaming Creatures* imaginatively re-conceives queer sexuality and queer bodies as anti-phallic. These new queer bodies interact through new sexual economies, which Smith constructs from harem imagery culled from old Hollywood films. *Flaming Creatures*, perhaps more than any film before or since, celebrates queerness as a will to transformation, both of the self and of the world.

Warhol's 1963 queer films *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)* are far less dazzling than Anger's film, with its rapid-fire montage, or Smith's film, with its bizarre mise-en-scène. These films instead extol ordinariness, but in the process they sabotage sexual certainty. *Kiss*'s multiple combinations of kissing couples, straight and gay, presented in long, single shots one after the other, displays desire unbound from narrative structure. Its serial images of non-stop osculation defy closure. They challenge the relationship between representability and sexual resolution by isolating and exaggerating the most ordinary contact point of sexual attraction, the kiss. *Haircut (No.1)* similarly unsettles coherent sexual identity by heightening, rather than resolving, the homoerotic imagery of its haircutting party. *Kiss* and *Haircut (No.1)* both imagine what sexual identity and sexual attraction might look like without the demand for fixed sexualities.

These four films from 1963 inaugurated avant-garde expressions of homosexuality in order to resist the normalizing impulses of the dominant culture. Their experimental approaches to desire, gendered identity, power relations, and representability do more

than foreshadow queer theory's current challenges to linear narratives of desire and coherent models of sexuality. They have much to contribute to it.

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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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